

the problem wasn't with the plan

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by [jamingbenn](#)

Summary

The plan was, George would move to Florida (and he does), move in with Clay (the guest bedroom is now his), try to forget about Clay's weird merch shrine (he's trying his best), and then fall in love.

Wait. Shit. Fuck. That last step wasn't a part of the plan.

Well, it's happening anyways.

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2/1/21: epilogue published. thank you for loving tpwwtp.

Notes

day 2 prompt for dream team week: roommates!!!!

self beta'd, so, y'know!

other than that, warnings for: pining. so much pining. sorry

also, completely fictional, with no intentions to disrespect the people whom these characters were based upon. yada yada, love u all.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

sunlight, shine bright, my hearts taken flight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George blames the Florida sun.

Sure, he's seen Clay before, that one cloudy day in Brighton, after Clay flew for 8 hours in a private jet to meet him for a meme. He knew what Clay looked like, standing outside the Pizza Hut like a fool in his own merchandise.

He's never really *seen* Clay, though, not really. That chance meeting in July was plagued with nervousness and social anxiety and a desperate, all encompassing hope that he'd get along with Clay— *Dream*, he still called him Dream back then— in person just as well as they did online.

Turns out, they had nothing to worry about, but July-George didn't know that yet.

Either way, now-George wanted to smash then-George's head in. Perhaps with a hammer. Maybe if then-George had looked closer, had really paid attention to the curves of his jaw and the arch of his brow, now-George wouldn't be struck again and again and again every time his gaze paused on Clay for just a moment too long.

Clay looks better the bigger the light is. Really, George has no one to blame but himself. He's not going to admit it, though, so he's gonna keep blaming Florida. Maybe if the sun was just that bit brighter in Brighton, maybe he would have noticed just how radiant Clay was months ago.

Maybe then he wouldn't feel quite as sucker punched when Clay grins over at him. So bowled over by something he can't quite identify when Clay stretches in a patch of sun, the golden rays carving out his cheekbones and lighting up his skin. Turning his eager, smiling energy into an electric atmosphere.

Sometimes George just wants to sit there and count the freckles on Clay's face.

This isn't George being sappy, if you can believe that. This is George refusing to believe in his reality.

He refuses to believe that the twinkle in Clay's eye has always be there— he would have noticed it, the first time he saw him, George thinks. Sure, maybe back then he was still scared to look too closely, unwilling to face up to the knowledge that Dream— *Clay*— was real, was here, this person that has screamed with him, has been there for him, was going to see his bumbling self i in person and choose to stay, still. Maybe his nerves had him shying away from direct gazes and had his eyes make only fleeting contact. Maybe it was him-- but he thinks he would have noticed, still, the way that when Clay smiles, no one can look away.

And there was no avoiding it now, was there, because when Clay takes a selfie of them ("G's first time trying dipping dots") so their smiling faces, sticky with ice cream, can be immortalized on his private Snapchat story, it's plain as day. It's not George being sappy when every picture has Clay beaming and George in awe.

It's helpless, the way George has been dragged into his orbit, upending his way of life and traveling half way across the globe just to be closer to him. Sometimes George remembers how he was still applying to normal-people-jobs when Dream uploaded his first YouTube video, how he was still speaking of maybe getting a masters to buy himself more time when Clay started blowing up. When two million turned to three million in a month and four million in a week. It's magnetic, and sometimes George feels like he's just being strung along for the ride, but then he turns to Clay only to find that he's already looking right back at him.

And then he feels better, a little, because even if he can't help being pulled into Clay's gravity, at least George has a place here. Clay's made sure of that.

Summer looks good on George. He's starting to tan a little, just a tad, and when he smiles, sometimes the apples of his cheeks tint themselves red. Half sunburn, half blush. Clay's a simple man, alright, and he doesn't live for much, but the evidence of joy on his best friend's face? That's something he absolutely can't go without.

Sometimes it hurts, seeing George smile like that, because Clay can't tear his eyes away. Sometimes his hands hurt with the effort to keep them by his sides. No one can blame him for that, Clay thinks. For wanting to reach out and brush the back of his hand over George's cheek, just to see if they're as warm as they look when he blushes just so.

And Clay has never been a coward, not in anything, but about this? He's scared shitless. If this was anyone else, he would have long grabbed the back of their neck halfway through their laugh, the one that makes their eyes disappear into half moons. Would have pushed them flush with the kitchen cabinets with a hand on their arm. Would have tugged them in on movie night, rearranging their limbs to rest against his own. Would have looked them straight in the eye, before closing his own.

But this isn't just anyone. This is George. And Clay's not the best mathematician, but even he knows that some risks aren't worth taking. The cost is just too much for him to bear.

Clay knows himself, and he knows his flaws. He's hotheaded, impulsive. He's lost enough to it. Not this, though. He won't let himself lose his best friend just because he couldn't keep himself in check.

There's no denying that it's hard, when the words threaten to bubble up and his gaze threatens to give him away, but. George was worth keeping this in, all of it, all the time.

That's not to say that it's all hopeless pining and strangled tension in the house, in fact, it's quite the opposite.

Dream hides the words he's itching to say behind big jokes and bigger laughs. George retreats into his small giggles and has mastered the art of quick subject changes. Most of what's being said here, happens in the lulls of the day. Happens in the unsuspecting moments, when one knew the other wasn't paying attention. Hidden between pranks and uproarious laughter and late night

streaming sessions their neighbors hated. Tucked between penises being drawn on sleeping faces and arguments about next week's groceries.

They were smart kids. Dumb enough to think that they could hide this forever, maybe, but smart enough in the meantime. No one was going to know, but someone was going to snap. Eventually.

George fell asleep on the couch sometimes.

It wasn't that big of a deal, given how screwed their sleep schedules both were, but it was still endearing to find George and Patches curled up around each other, snoozing the day away. There was no rhyme or rhythm to it— George just liked to nap.

Today was no different, but something had Clay stopped in the middle of their hallway, rooted to the ground. Fascinated by the way George's chest rose and fell, just that tiny bit, with every breath he took. It reminds him of when Patches would nap on him, settled right in the dip of his chest, and sometimes Clay would be able to feel her little kitty exhales, tickling the edge of his skin.

Watching George's fingers twitch where they rested lightly, he wonders if he would be able to feel George's heartbeat against his own, like the steady huffs of Patches' breath. A pitter patter of life and love.

After all that, George is as surprised as anyone else when it turns out he's the one who breaks first.

It just happened, okay? One minute he was flipping steaks while battling away Clay's interfering arms; one minute he was telling Clay to stop with his teasing before he ruins dinner from laughing, and in the next, he'd pushed Clay back against the fridge, his arms above his head.

Clay is taller, heavier, and fitter than George, but he lets George back up into him, easy, a bemused smile playing on his lips.

George has a brief moment of clarity, one brief moment where he allows himself to wonder what the hell exactly he was doing, before he decides to fuck it all. Just run with it. It'll be weirder to bail now.

"Stop distracting me from dinner, or there won't be any," George threatens, semi-playfully. "Seriously, Clay, your mouth's gonna get you in trouble some day. Shut up already."

Maybe I want it to, is what Clay doesn't say, looking down on George, who was only keeping him pinned in place because Clay wasn't fighting back. Maybe I want to get in trouble, if it's with you.

He says none of that. What he says is, arguably, much, much worse. He blames the playful glint in George's eye, the smile on his blushing face, and the grip of his hand around Clay's bicep.

Listen, if all Clay was waiting for was a sign of interest from George, something more than his

bashful smiles and secret giggles, something that couldn't be chalked up to reservation or shyness, Clay figures he wasn't get a clearer sign than this. That's all he's saying in defense of what that came tumbling out next.

“You want me to shut up? Make me, then.”

George's world shorts out for a minute. He never knew when Clay was playing the world's most extended game of chicken, or when he actually meant the words he was putting out there, or when he was designing some elaborate test for George to unwittingly participate.

He doesn't think it's his fault for blanking at the bemused smirk on Clay's face, annoyingly taller than him despite being the one pinned down. He also doesn't think it's his fault for roaring back to life, Clay's words hitting him like a truck.

They should probably talk about this, George thinks, but in this moment, Clay basically just dared him, and George was no coward.

“Yeah?” His grip on Clay was loosening, but he kept their gaze steady. He needed to know that Clay was going to let him do this. Subconsciously, he thinks he was still looking for some type of confirmation. A yes or no. A way for the decision to be taken out of his hands.

Clay only smiled back, one of his tiny ones, the one that's more in the cheeks than with his mouth. None of this was as difficult for him as it was for George.

“Yeah,” he breathed back out, keeping his eyes open just long enough to see George beam, before closing them and *finally*, finally leaning in.

Chapter End Notes

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moonlight, star bright, the blinding in my eye

Chapter Notes

SORRY THIS TOOK FOREVER.

self beta'd, yada yada. first long form fic, please take mercy on me.
idk if i should change the tags to feature heavy making out, but here we are.

oc warning: brief mention of an original character, here to play as dream's ex, cause i needed it for plot lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

• +°*•••☾ moon ☾••*°+ •

By some measures, you could say it started that day in the kitchen. After George pressed Clay to the fridge and kissed him for the first time.

George thinks it still took them a while, even after all that.

After that day though, that's when they started to get more bold.

They're still tentative, of course, but now, when its late and they're both tired, lying haphazardly in Clay's bed reading YouTube comments, no one makes any noises about George going back to his own room. Now, Clay's allowed to mindlessly run his fingers across George scalp, sitting up against his headboard as he destroys Nick in a game of 8ball.

They never really wanted to leave each other alone in the first place, not since the first day George moved in. Maybe that's when it *really* started, when they met for the first time, and decided that they liked spending time with each other more than they liked being alone.

When you like someone so much, when you feel like you have to make up for lost time, when you're already used to having their voice in your headphones as you fall asleep, half way across the globe— George supposes that's why it was easy. Too easy to go from giggling on the couch watching Clay cajole Patches into sitting still, to wrestling him for the controller mid-Fall Guys tournament, to letting his lips catch on the skin of Clay's neck, mouthing at the words he still doesn't quite know how to say.

He can't recall the last time he felt quite this comfortable just *being*, around anyone at all. He can't imagine that Dream feels this much, this soon, just as he does.

You would think that being in the same timezone meant that their sleeping schedules would improve, but really, their life is as hectic as ever.

If they get caught up in something, there's absolutely no guarantee that they'll, you know, actually sleep when they're tired. 3am video recordings are, sadly, all too common.

Which is how George found himself rousing late on this fine Tuesday morning, just minutes before noon. He'll count this as a dub.

Swinging his legs off his bed, he ruffles his own hair before pulling on a shirt. He's slept in his own room for once, having left Clay alone to finish up a new video last night.

A quick look at his notifications informs him that Clay managed to upload it with no problem, at— welp— 4am last night.

“Guess he isn't gonna be up for a while,” he mumbles around a smile, heading over to the kitchen to fix himself some breakf— lunch? No, breakfast still, he thinks. He's in the mood for cereal.

He could make something to surprise Clay with, but who knows when he's ever going to wake up — the man is known to sometimes sleep for 16 hours straight, especially post-tenuous-editing-sessions like last night's ought to have been.

They both tend to work in bursts, which is why neither of them have a particular regular upload

schedule. The calendar on their fridge is a mess of scribbles, ideas, and strikethroughs, but what matters is that George and Clay can decipher what it says.

It gets forgotten, sometimes, given that they have a version of it on Google Calendar that's they share with Sapnap, but it's been pretty up to date recently.

George crosses out "Minecraft, but George sees for me" from the "Monday" box, humming around the cap of the whiteboard marker as he writes a tiny "UPLOADED! :D" under it.

Content, he grabs a bowl to start the cereal process. Rice Krispies first, milk last, and he will absolutely die on this hill.

He's absentmindedly scrolling through Twitter— apparently Sapnap thinks he can beat George in the next MCC, which, such bold words— when he hears Clay's door open. Shoveling another spoonful of breakfast into himself, he perks up a little. Not enough to pause mid-construction of his absolute roast of a reply to Sapnap and look up, though.

It was just nice to know that Clay was up. It's always nice to know that Clay's in his vicinity, just a shout away. Sometimes he forgets, but that's exactly what has every tiny reminder— a door opening, the faint sound of his yawn, a soft sneeze— send a little jolt of happiness through his core.

Clay doesn't think George knows this, but sometimes, when he catches him alone, George has the tiniest of smiles on his face.

He doesn't really know why George is that way only somedays— good mood, maybe?— but he's never one to past it up. It's one of those small things that warms Clay up from the inside out; the way he'll find George alone, petting Patches, or calling his mom, or vacuuming the living room, all while wearing this little content look, his lips quirked up just a tad.

It's not his normal resting face, that's all Clay knows. And while walking out of his room into the kitchen this morning, there it was again, unmistakable and unmissable as always. Just George, absentmindedly typing something out on his phone as he's eating cereal, looking settled and *happy*.

Clay's socked feet halt midway through the hallway, his own hunger forgotten. Just him, standing there, leaned up against the wall, watching George's smile turn into a giggle as the sun shined through the kitchen window. Taking a moment to just bask in the aura of happiness that his person, dwarfed in an oversized shirt and baggy sweats, and letting his the warmth of his gentle happiness spread to his own.

He didn't need a mirror to know that he probably has a really dumb smile on his face right now.

What a simp, Clay laughs to himself as he walks up to swing an arm around George, gratified in the way George immediately leans back into it.

"Hey." George smiles up at him. "Video upload went okay?"

"Mm," Clay hums, hooking his head over George's shoulder to sneak a look at his phone. "What's got you laughing like that?"

"Nah, just Sapnap being an idiot. Didn't expect you to be up this soon, though."

Clay shrugged. "Couldn't sleep, I guess."

Clay wasn't going to admit it, but he hadn't been sleeping as well without George there. Which was stupid, because sometimes George snores, and he definitely steals all of the blankets, and Clay liked having his space to spread out, but he just— he liked having George wiggle up into his space *more*. He didn't know how to talk about it, though.

It seems too fast, too soon for that sort of discussion— they've only just kissed for the first time a couple weeks ago, never mind that they've been dancing around this for months, but still. Clay doesn't exactly know how to say, "Hey, listen, I know we've only been sleeping together for a couple of weeks, but turns out I really like that, wanna like, I don't know, move into my room, or better yet, never leave my bed?"

He doesn't know if that would scare George away. He'd definitely be called a simp either way, though, so he'll keep it on the down low for now, thank you very much.

"It's probably because you stole my bed buddy, anyways." He glares mockingly at Patches, who paid them no attention as she delicately licked her paws.

George laughed, turning his face up to look at Clay. “Hey, it’s not my fault your cat likes me better. I give the better cuddles and she knows it.”

Clay's eyes go soft, thinking about the picture he has hidden in an album on his phone, the one that he secretly took when George fell asleep on the couch, with Patches tucked under his chin.

“Yeah,” he breathes, fond. “You really do.”

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"I'm like, actually excited for this to happen," Dream said as he spun around in his office chair.

They've moved their set ups into the "merch shrine" room, ostensibly so it can be shown off in George's face cam streams, but actually so they didn't have to make sure George's room was free of anything incriminating every time they streamed.

George thought the logistics would be more difficult to set up, maybe, but other than having only one audio input, and always putting Clay on mute so his audio output wouldn't double up with his real life voice, it's been surprisingly easy to handle.

That, and it was nice to have Clay right next to him as they speedrun 1.16 or whatever. The only time it was inconvenient was when they were competing, 'cause they could totally stream snipe one another, but that's a minor problem, really. George moved his PC back into his own room for the last Minecraft Championships just to stop that from happening, but this MCC, they've been teamed together, which makes everything easier.

“Like, obviously it sucks that Sapnap’s not on our team, but he’s gonna be with Techno and Scott, so like, who is he to complain,” Dream was still saying, George humming in response as he booted up his laptop.

“Too bad we’re still gonna destroy them, then,” George responded, distracted by the loading screen on his laptop. “Hey, did you wanna practice parkour or mini-games first? And did Tommy reply to you yet?”

The next MCC would be this Saturday, and this time, they’ve been teamed with Tommy and Sylvee, which was bound to be a fun time. The streams of them training with the team have been doing well, and they were planning on doing another one right now. Just for the afternoon, because Thursdays were the standard Davidson-Family-FaceTime days, which meant George had to go in a couple of hours regardless.

“Yeah,” Dream said, pulling up Discord. “Said he’d be on in a bit, but we could start without him. Sylvee can’t make it though.”

George hummed in acknowledgement, looking over to where Dream had begun setting up the stream. “Lemme just double check the background— yeah, we’re good. Green screen’s blocking it all. Just don’t pop over to this side of the room.”

“Who do you think I am, an amateur? I’m not gonna accidentally face reveal on a MCC *practice* stream,” Dream emphasized.

“Can never be too sure,” George teased, cocking an eyebrow up judgmentally. “You’ve surprised me before.”

“You’re cheating,” Dream hissed, as Tommy scream-laughed in the background, his body all tensed up in concentration. “You’re *cheating!*”

George was wheezing, laughing so hard his eyes were tearing up. Which was a real problem, because he needed his vision to finish Dream off, the last person opposing his Dodgebolt team.

“Suck it, green man!” Tommy crowed, his avatar taking a victory lap around the arena.

“Tommy! You’re not helping, shut up, don’t wind him up even more, watch me kill him in one try, Dream you’re going *down*, and— HA!” As the fireworks went off on screen, George finally gave up on holding his cackles in, slumping in his seat as Dream sputtered next to him.

“I can’t believe you just did that. It’s like you don’t love me anymore.” Dream goaded, trying for petulant but missing by a mile. Probably because of how hard he was smiling.

“Who said I loved you,” George counters, still breaking up into giggles, his eyes twinkling. He wanted to turn to look at Clay, but he didn’t dare to, for fear that his face-cam would show too much of the fondness he felt.

It’s weird, lying to their audience, but there’s just some things that’s better kept for themselves. Like how he calls him Clay more than Dream, now, and how they’re definitely not just friends, and even how sometimes, you know, Minecraft coding sessions devolve into making out sessions instead.

Still, sometimes it’s convenient that both of them are dancing around the idea of “love” as if they’re in a 1.16 PvP duel, with neither party willing to make the first shot.

Doesn’t mean they can’t tease each other about it, though.

“Really? Then why’d you make me pancakes the other morning?”

“Have you tried making a batch of pancakes for just one person? I was making pancakes for *us*, cause I’m such a team player!”

Tommy’s loud clearing of his throat jolted them both back to the stream. “Not to interrupt your lover’s spat, gentlemen, but I’m really feeling like I’m not being paid enough attention here, and that really won’t do, you know—”

"Shut up, Tommy," Dream and George responded in unison, before all three of them devolved into loud giggles and the occasional guffaw.

Sometimes George can’t believe this is his job. That he’s being paid money to sit with his best friend— boyfriend?— in a house they share, playing video games and shit-talking his mates. That there’s hard parts, for sure, but that he’s somehow surrounded himself a community that’s going

through this rollercoaster ride of fame and fortune together with him. That they all share the knowledge of just how hard it is and how ridiculous this all can be. That through his highs and in his lows, he'll always have a group, a family, even, to share these experiences with.

After the chaos of a stream, it can be disconcerting to retreat back to the quiet emptiness of his own room.

Which is not to say that the house is *quiet*— he can hear Clay banging about the kitchen, fixing dinner for the both of them, and he can certainly hear Patches snoring by his feet, but it's just.

It's just that there's so many things to keep track of during a stream. He has to read donations, talk to chat, talk to Dream, make sure he's not giving too much away to either Dream *or* chat (and those are two different subsets of information, alright, which makes things even *more* difficult.) Oh, and play Minecraft.

He also had to talk to Tommy for the past stream, which, as always, magnifies any chaos tenfold.

So it's understandable that after all that sensory bombardment, George feels a little disconnected just watching his mouse spin around in a rainbow wheel on FaceTime, waiting for his parents to pick up his call.

It's kind of nice, actually. Just to be away from all the quiet and noise, being able to just focus on one thing instead. To just decompress.

Its times like this when he really appreciates the open door, closed door policy he has with Clay—which is to say, when their doors are open, anyone's free to enter, but when a door is closed, knock first before barging in. Clay doesn't really tend to close his door, like, ever, as far as George can tell, but George likes to shut his if he's sleeping or if he's phoning his parents. It's not like Dream can't shout for him in an emergency, or reach him on Discord.

The little ding of a call connecting pulls him out of his trance, and he grins, reflexively, upon seeing his parent's pixellated faces.

"Hi," George starts, spinning around his chair, waving a little sheepishly.

"Oh, baby," his mum smiles, before proceeding to interrogate him about his week, just as she's done for every call they've had since he's moved out. "You're basically living in a frat house—I don't know why I let you fly all the way over there, you've been through university once already. Isn't that enough?"

"Mum!" George laughs with his Dad, whose shaking his head as well. "It's not a frat house, Mum."

"Oh, you can't tell me you kids aren't throwing parties every chance you get."

"No, really, mum," he protests. "It's just Dream and I and our video games." He doesn't want his parents to think that he's a loser with no life, but, like, he is a Minecraft YouTuber who barely gets any natural sunlight, so how she thinks George is a party animal, that's just beyond him.

"Hm," his mum responds, unconvinced, but thankfully, thankfully dropping it. "As long as you're happy and safe, then, my love."

"I am," George smiles, softly, the small one he sometimes doesn't even realize he's making. He glances down at his hands, where he's been twiddling with a string on the hoodie he's wearing, which, he's pretty sure he stole this sweater from Clay, actually.

He looks back up at his parents, who've let their son fly hours away from them, who've put their whole trust into him, into this whole "YouTube" thing they still don't quite understand. He reads their worry in the creases of their eyes and the steadiness of their gaze.

He thinks about waking up next to Clay, about hearing Clay's laugh through the ear pressed on Clay's chest instead of through his headphones, miles apart. He thinks about the contentment he feels just from being around him.

"I really am, Mum. Don't worry about me."

Sometimes it's like George is seeing Dream for the first time all over again, in these quiet moments, with his face lit up by the light of his phone alone.

He's given up trying to blame anything else for it. It's not the sun, it's not the light, it's not the smile on Dream's face. It's just George taking a step back, and then promptly being shocked by just how lucky he got, all over again.

He locks his phone with an audible click, a sound that should have jolted him out of this trance, but instead just emphasizes the intensity of the silence instead.

He's has never been this comfortable with anyone else before.

George doesn't know what he looks like right now, well, a little dazed, maybe, but when Clay turns his stupid face to look at him, Clay still breaks into a smile. One of those stupid, small smiles that George has tentatively, and only in his own mind, claimed as his own— the one where his eyes crinkle just a tad and the corner of his mouth lifts, amused, before staying there.

"Hey," he says, reaching down to cup George's face. "You look happy."

George can't help but laugh. "I think I am."

"Mm. Wanna tell me why?"

I think I love you, is what George doesn't say. I think I just realized that I've never felt so calm and so assured ever before and I'm just laying beside you doing absolutely nothing at all and I never want this to end. I never want to be away from your side.

He says none of that.

What he does, instead, is to grab Clay's phone out of his hand, tossing it somewhere into the rumpled sheets. What he does is he reaches up to pull Clay's face down to touch his lips with his own.

Maybe George doesn't have the words for what he's feeling right now. Maybe he has them but doesn't know how to speak them out loud, into this delicate, fragile space he built with Clay. But he can kiss him, and hope Clay understands. Hope Clay can read into the urgent press of his lips for the words he's not saying, can feel what George is drowning in in every swipe of his tongue.

He thinks Clay understands him just fine, anyways, judging by the way he goes slack for just a moment before grabbing George's waist to spin them around. To pin George under him as he pauses, just for a second, to gaze down at George before they both giggle and smile.

"Why'd you stop kissing me," George whines, just a little, his voice even quieter than what it usually is, tangling his fingers in Clay's hair.

"Cause when I kiss you I don't get to watch you smile," Clay says, surprisingly earnest as he rests his fingertips on the corner of George's eyes, where it was crinkling with joy.

"You're an idiot," George laughs, a short, loud thing that surprises himself with how light it is. "And don't stop kissing me. Never stop kissing me."

And for once, for once in his entire, stubborn lifetime, Clay doesn't argue. Just smiles that private, George smile again, before putting his lips back on George's own.

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When this all first started, the weight of George's body was still unfamiliar, a line of warmth against his own. But whenever he turned his face to look up at Clay, his gaze was anything but foreign.

Dream couldn't quite read him, then. Not fully, not yet. Still can't, really. But as long as he stayed right here in his arms, maybe one day. One day Clay will work through his fear and his bluff and one day he'll know just what this look in George's eye means.

One day Clay won't have to guess what it means when they're laying in bed and George looks at him like there's words stuck on the roof of his mouth; half dazed, half anxious.

Sometimes, about some things, it's not hard to know that George's holding something in.

There's things George won't talk about. He's careful about it— shields them behind jokes, clap backs, banter, and silence. Shields them behind kisses so deep it feels like George is trying to imprint words into Clay's mouth with his tongue.

There's so much that's carefully unsaid between them.

It's scary even to Clay, sometimes, trying to navigate this delicate balance of communication between the jitters and their desires.

But Clay *wants*. He wants to hold George close; he wants to know what every twitch in his face means, to know what's bothering him, to know how he likes his tea.

He's too greedy, he thinks. He just wants, and he wants, just to know everything until there's absolutely nothing more to know anymore.

The soft murmuring laughter from George's room was barely loud enough to be heard, but still plenty loud enough to put a smile on Clay's face.

Thursdays were the Davidson family FaceTime days, and George always retreated into his room eager and excited for it, juggling his laptop in one hand and trying to kick Patches out of his room with the other.

Clay doesn't really know what they talk about, and has only ever really popped in to say hi a couple times himself. He kicks his feet up onto the coffee table, musing.

It's different from the easy way George is around Clay's family, for sure. Granted, it's bound to be, when Clay's family can drop by a couple of times a week, since they live so nearby. Still, Clay definitely feels like an outsider looking in sometimes, when it comes to interacting with George's parents and siblings.

Hell, Clay isn't even sure if George told them about how they've, you know, started making out pretty regularly now. Scratch that—they haven't even really talked about it themselves, so Clay doesn't really know how George would even go about telling his family, really. "Hey, you guys remember Clay? I live with him? Yeah? Okay, so we're kind of dating, I think, I mean we kiss a lot, and cuddle a fair bit, and I hog all of his blankets, but we haven't really *talked* about it just yet, so I could be wrong?"

Clay frowns, picking at a thread that's loose on a sofa cushion. They should probably talk about it soon. I mean, *Clay* wants to call George his boyfriend, and he's pretty sure George wants the same, if the flushed look on his face whenever they kiss is anything to go by.

He doesn't really know what he's waiting for—for George to bring it up, probably? George has always been the one to define the boundaries, and Clay certainly doesn't want to rush him.

He knows George is private. That he keeps his cards close to his chest. So close, sometimes, that Clay doesn't even know if George himself realizes what he's holding onto.

Clay thinks George might be scared, sometimes, of this tentative thing, of defining what they have. When they're just post-stream, and he turns to look at him with a pinched look on his face. When he pauses for just a moment before picking Clay's hand up in his own. When they're out and about and it takes George a second too long to swing himself into Clay's arms.

He'll wait, Clay decides. He'll wait till George is ready to talk about it to bring it up.

In the meantime, he's content with the knowing look in his mother's eyes when she comes round to drop off leftovers and she catches them curled into each other on the sofa. Content with the way his sister calls them gross and tells them kissing gives them cooties. Content in the way his brother mimes whipping motions when he gets up to grab George a water.

Content in at least having a small group of people understand just how much George means to him.

His phone buzzes in his hand, shocking him out of his trance. Looking down, he can't help but laugh.

New iMessage from: Sapnap

look what i just found

you guys are disgusting

tone it down

dream and george being fond and in love for 8 minutes straight [<https://youtube.com/watch?v=FGTTYcKyVhs>]

Well, maybe that small group is a little bigger than he thought.

"It's hard," Clay caught George saying. "It's harder than I thought."

Clay didn't mean to stop outside of George's closed door, but he overheard George sounded tired and sad, and couldn't help himself. His door was cracked open just a tiny bit, and Clay could see George slouched in his chair, spinning a pen around.

"What specifically, though," Sapnap's tinny voice could be heard from George's speakers. "Like, aren't you glad you're actually dating now?"

"I don't even know if we're actually dating," George whined. "We haven't really talked about it."

Well, that makes for two of us, Clay thought.

"You two are *hopeless*," Sapnap groaned. "Do you, like, want to be dating or not?!"

“I do!” George protested. “I mean, I think so, anyways. That’s not why it’s fucking hard, though. It’s hard cause like, this thing is *ours*, you know? And every time we stream or post a video or something the comments are full of questions. And it’s none of their business what Clay and I are. I don’t want this to become part of the bit. I don’t want this to be part of the content.”

“You want it just for you,” Sapnap said, his voice uncharacteristically small.

“Yeah,” George responded, equally downcast. “And I don’t know if that’s even possible, given all that Dream has become.”

Clay tore his gaze away from George’s sad form, forcing himself to walk away.

Fuck.

The problem is, Clay knew exactly what George is talking about. The moment you put anything at all out into the public, it becomes a part of the story.

It’s unavoidable. It’s why he’s kept his face private, it’s why he refuses to share much about his private life, it’s why he swears all his friends from high school to absolute silence.

He wants to control what becomes the story. He wants it to be his talent, his camaraderie with his friends, his public personality and his competitiveness.

But he also wants to shout it from the rooftops that George is his. That his soft smiles and his little giggles are off limits, off the table for anyone else but himself. He wants to let the world know that he has a beautiful boy in his arms and he wants to plant Minecraft roses next to their beds on stream.

Clay has never been one to keep his love private, always eager to share his happiness with the world. Even when he was dating Madison, he never kept her a secret.

But things are a little different now, aren't they. Now he has George to think about as well.

George stays sluggish for the rest of the day. He's slow to chirp Clay or make fun of him, even when he tripped over his own feet while trying not to step on Patches, which, on any other day, George would have been ruthless about.

"Come watch," George says, gesturing Clay over to where he was laid on Clay's own bed. "New CaptainSparklez upload for the void world."

"Ooh," Clay responds happily— they've been following Jordan in his latest Minecraft series eagerly. He crawls in bed, fitting himself around the space George left for him, sinking into the warmth of his body with contentment. George leaned down to touch his lips against Clay's hairline, a little wordless hello, before pressing play.

These were some of Clay's favorite moments. Just him, with his favorite person, watching quality content, having George's little giggles prompt his own. Being able to hear George snort every time Jordan started talking inexplicably in a Russian accent, being able to feel the weight and warmth of George's body wrapped against his own— these were the moments that no one ever showed you in the movies. These were the moments that Clay valued beyond belief.

He wasn't willing to give this up. Not for anything in the world. But the ache in his heart had him acutely aware that the only reason they were able to meet each other, to be together, to be this carefree, was the same reason that threatened to tear it all apart.

His audience. Which, don't get him wrong— Clay loved his audience above all else. But he didn't know what he was going to do if it was going to cost him George.

When the video finished, George wrapped his arms tighter around Clay's torso, rearranging them so that Clay was basically laid directly on top of him. "Sleepy time," he murmured.

"Alright," Clay responded, and after one last glance to see George's eyes flicker shut, turned out the lights to envelope them both in the safety of darkness.

George fell quickly into an uneasy slumber, tossing and turning gently in his sleep. As Clay felt George's uneven breaths hitch against his own skin, the weight of George's earlier words blanketed him like the darkness around them.

He had to do right by George.

He doesn't really know what that means just yet, though.

Chapter End Notes

one or two more chapters to go!!! next chapter definitely will be up by this week (school's over, thank god), so please do subscribe if you want a notification whenever it comes out.

also, kudos and comments are the most appreciated. please please please leave kind words lol

thinking about posting extra discarding scenes on my tumblr? lmk if there's any interest at all

love u thank u for reading <3

i'm on twitter! @jamingbenn

sunshine, fly high, the gravity of the sky

Chapter Notes

owo... wha- what's this? a new chapter uwu???? (ok real talk most of this was written weeks ago i just had to FINISH IT but then i got distracted writing [what he wants](#), so... SORRY! its here now!!!)

also: tw cheating. (brief oc & dream) there's a brief mention of an original character being dream's fictional ex in this made up story. if this triggers you, proceed with caution. or maybe just skip the whole first scene.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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When Clay opened his eyes the next morning, the sun was peeking shyly through their unclosed blinds, shining on a patch of George's hair in a way that had it looking almost golden in the light.

Clay had to physically stop himself from reaching out and brushing his fingers through George's honey brown strands, not wanting to disturb the picture-perfect scene laid out in front of him.

George's eyes were still closed, and Clay would have thought that he was asleep, if not for the slow way his hands were steadily tracing circles onto the back of Clay's own.

Clay smiled, his eyes going soft, a tingle of warmth radiating from where their hands where were connected.

"Tell me something you haven't told anyone else before."

George's voice was gentle, not quite jarring in the soft quiet of the morning, but an unexpected little tug on Clay's disjointed thoughts, still.

Clay propped himself up in return, shifting his weight to look at George, whose eyes were still stubbornly closed. The light was forgiving on George's face, painting him over in a youthful glow.

Clay took a second more, taking in the sight before him. He hummed, gathering up his distracted, roaming thoughts. Stalling, just for a moment, just to mull over what George just said.

"Well," he started, his voice rough from disuse. "I guess one time, when I was five, I really wanted a family dog."

"No." George's hand stopped its mindless tracing, and his eyes opened, gaze strangely intense. "Tell me something *you haven't told anyone else before.*"

Clay sucked in a breath, too loud, too harsh in the hush of the room.

"Last year." Clay tried again. "After Madison told me it was over."

He exhaled, unable to look away, struck in place by George's piercing gaze.

"Last year, after Madison told me she cheated on me and that I deserved to know."

He looked away, vulnerable. "I spent that entire night crying on the bed we used to share."

"I knew that," George said, barely above a murmur. "You were on the phone with Sapnap and I for a part of it, remember."

"Right. That's not what I was going to talk about. The point of that was, I spent that whole night crying. Just fucking bawling my eyes out. I should have been so, so mad. I mean, she destroyed what I thought was the best thing I had."

"But I wasn't. I was upset, sure. But I wasn't angry. And that's not normal, not for me."

"Mm," George responded. "You and your anger tantrums."

“Right. But I didn’t have it within me to be mad at her. I mean, I knew why she did it. I knew why she told me.” He was picking up speed, now, now that he was finally talking about this, something he’d kept so deep inside himself he didn’t even know how he was finding the words. But they were here now, these words that were tumbling one after another out of him, and he couldn’t stop them if he tried.

“It was her fault, though,” George prompted.

“I mean, sure. It was her bad. Maddie shouldn’t have gone and slept with him. But I knew her well enough, knew her cracks and her faults and her insecurities, to know why she did it. And, god help me, I loved her.”

Clay loved with his whole being. He paused, not really sure how to talk about that, conscious about what it would reveal about his affection for George.

He barreled on. “I signed up to love all of her. I loved her through her breakdowns, I loved her through her highs and her lows, I loved all of it. So I couldn’t blame her. I wasn’t enough to keep her grounded, to have her trust that she was loved. That she was enough.”

“Clay.” George put a light hand where Clay’s fingers were unconsciously tapping out a nervous beat. “It’s not on you to fix her.”

“I *know* that. But I loved her in spite of her needing fixing. So when she came back, crying, makeup running down her face, it’s not like I could just— I still.” He breathed. “I— I still cared too much to blame her. She owned up to it. That was something, right? She knew she fucked up. I knew her too well, I knew the hurricane that was going through her at that moment. It felt wrong, to be angry, at someone so vulnerable, someone so regretful, someone who was more than angry enough at herself.”

“I mean, I’m no saint, I did eventually get really fucking mad, you saw it, you heard about me trashing the bed because I couldn’t sleep in it knowing what she’d done.” Clay rolled his eyes a little, letting out another long exhale. He was losing speed, the words catching up with the emotions rolling through him, but he trudged on. It felt important, somehow, that he talked about it right now, right here, in the hazy, dreamy light of the morning. In the softness of a morning that felt too gentle to have anything really hurt him.

“But that night, maybe it was the freshness of the wound, but genuinely, there was no anger within

me. Just loss, emptiness, and tears.”

George said nothing, even though it looked like he wanted to. He reached up to brush at Clay’s face, a comforting gesture.

“That’s still not really what I meant to talk about.” Clay leaned into George’s touch, huffing out a small smile. “I meant to talk about how that day, in that moment, it occurred to me that— that I didn’t know how long it had been since I defaulted to an emotion that wasn’t anger.”

“That’s not true.”

“But it was. Kind of, anyways. Everything else I feel, I used to feel after, or around, the anger.” His words were picking up speed now. This, he knew how to talk about. This was the easy part.

“I wanted to be good at YouTube because I was angry at everyone who said I couldn’t do it. I get better and better at Minecraft cause a part of me is probably always gonna be angry at people being better than me, especially at something that’s ostensibly my job. I’m anally retentive about losing cause I get so mad about it. My pride was bigger than me, man.”

“You’re not just that, though. And you’ve definitely not like that anymore.”

“Right, but remember, this was what, two years ago? I think it was. Which is not to say I didn’t have happy moments, didn’t have joyful moments, but they were all mingled with like, relief. A gleeful kind of satisfaction. That stems from proving people wrong. A righteous anger.”

George hummed, but Clay barreled on.

“Which is why, that night when Mads— sorry, I mean, Madison. The night when Madison left, saying this wasn’t fixable and wasn’t fair to me and that she was so, so, sorry; when I was just sitting right about here,” Clay waved a hand in the general direction of his closet, “and sobbing came easier to me than being mad at her, part of me was so relieved.”

“So relieved that my anger wasn’t consuming me.” He sat up, then, looking George in his eyes. It was suddenly being pertinent that George understood the weight of what he was saying, even if he barely found any of the words until they were already coming out of his mouth.

He was realizing things as fast as he was letting them out. At this point, he needed to let this story go more for himself than to share it with George.

“When you’re angry,” he tried, “Negativity can’t pull you down. Negativity stops being wrong, and starts becoming justified. Anger is the easiest emotion— its the emotion I understand, its the emotion that doesn’t feel bad, doesn’t feel isn’t sour bile rising up your throat, a darkening thud of emotion that drags you down. Anger feels *good*. It feels righteous.”

He paused. “It’s dangerous,” he concludes.

“I hadn’t even realized that I was being consumed in this cycle of, of using anger as motivation, and equating feeling smug satisfaction with happiness, and seeking out the former in the chase for the latter. That day was when it broke, maybe.”

“Right,” George said.

“Yeah. That day was when I think I realized, all of those things that made me feel on top of this world, like I was fucking invincible, none of it actually fucking mattered. None of it actually made me feel happy. But I thought it did. So I was stuck chasing more and more of it.”

Clay looked away from George carefully.

“*None of it actually made me happy*, George. What made me the happiest was that honking laugh Mads would let out sometimes, the one she hated, the one she let out when we tried to bake a cake that one time just because, and we got flour in Patches’ fur, and he spread it all through the apartment. What made me happiest was when Mads—“ and here he stumbled again, with how intimate the nickname felt. He didn’t quite feel like he had a right to use that endearment, not anymore, and that still kind of tripped him up, even now.

He cleared his throat. “When Madison had a rough day and I could tell just from the way she tucked herself into my arms.”

He looked down at his hands, remembering how small Madison’s own had felt against his, sometimes.

It was the small moments, Clay realized. The small moments he didn't even cherish before they were gone, all of a sudden, lost to the past. That was what he was mourning, that night he sobbed till his eyes hurt and his mouth went dry.

"I was so relieved that day, because it was like I finally figured out what I actually cared about. When I was too busy crying about everything I'd lost to be mad at how I was, I don't know, wronged, I guess, it hit me that. That I was crying because that was what fucking mattered to me. That was what I actually cared about."

But somewhere between hitting a million subscribers and trying to maximize his revenue, he'd lost track of them, lost sight of how much they mattered, and left Madison behind.

He doesn't love her anymore, that space in his heart that she once owned long since scabbed over, well healed up. But sometimes it twinges, just a little bit, just enough to remind him to cherish the moments of contentment that come between the absolute highs and devastating lows, the moments that turned out to be the only ones that really mattered.

"It was like I was rebooted, put into a hard reset. I knew the anger would come, but I also knew I couldn't depend on it to scrub away all the other emotions. The complicated ones that hurt as they hit you."

George was smiling now, a little smug thing, and Clay couldn't help but find it ludicrous. "Anyways, that was when I realized I really needed to stop defaulting to anger as my first response. It's easy, sure; it's comforting; it hides all else, but it's not productiv— what are you laughing at?! I'm baring my whole heart out, here," he laughed, reaching out to wipe that look off of George's face.

George grinned back, catching Clay's wrist. "I'm so proud of you."

"Yeah?" Clay looked up at George's semi-smug face. "Shut up. I bet you are."

"No, seriously," George laughed, the serious atmosphere broken just like that. "That's a hard thing to realize. But something being hard has never stopped you, ever. And I'm proud of you for like, recognizing it all, and, you know, growing from it."

Clay threw his head back in soft laughter, swinging a leg over George's torso to straddle him. "Of course you are."

Clay looks down at George's smiling face, happiness lighting him up from the inside out, just for one pure, undeniable second. He exhales, trying to keep the smile off his face, but failing miserably. "Of course you are, you fucking idiot."

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"The fans are really hyped about this, huh," Clay laughed, watching his YouTube premiere chat fly by him. From what he could tell, most of them were something along the lines of, "SAPNAP POACHED POG?", which, fair.

The whole Technoblade rivalry thing is just kind of funny now, given how friendly the two are in real life. You didn't hear it from Dream, but Clay's all too willing to admit that Techno was probably the only one who got what it felt like, having your brand be centered on being better than others. How tiring it can be to try and keep that up, to try and outdo not just everyone else, but also yourself, time and time again.

They're both plenty confident and secure in their own skillset, sure, but it can be confining, sometimes, to hone something down to the finest details. To needlessly sharpen already deadly edges.

So it's funny how everyone else plays up the "rivalry" for views and likes, but, well. Even Clay has to admit that it's a compelling narrative to lean into sometimes.

Case in point: today's MCC. Which, again, was bound to be doubly compelling, because they've broken up the Dream Team by having Sapnap team with Techno. And all parties involved are *way* too willing to play up the whole "kidnapped" angle for shits and giggles.

And YouTube views, of course.

George looked over at Dream, his mouse hovering, ready to start his stream. He cocked an eyebrow, a silent question, and Dream nodded in response.

“Let’s get it,” he breathed. Game on.

Two and a half hours into the tournament later, things have only gotten more stressful, with their team, the Red Rabbits, dipping in and out of second place. Annoyingly, Techno’s team was solidly in first. Sapnap had joined their voice call during the last break just to crow, drowning out even Tommy in volume some how.

It all came down to this last game. Clay wiped his hands on his sweats, trying to dry off his damp hands, and George was being a fucking traitor, narrating his every move while Tommy cackled in the background.

“Dream is so sweaty right now guys, you won’t believe it,” George laughed into the mic. “Dream, we *got* this, stop being so stressed out!”

“I’m not stressed!” Clay protested fruitlessly, because, like, alright, maybe he was kind of sweaty. Maybe the way he was scrolling through his empty hotbar was kind of frenzied. Whatever. No one had to know, *George*. “Whatever. We got this. Just need to finish above orange by 500 points and we then we got this! It’s doable. It’s more than doable. We’re gonna do it.”

“Are you scared, *Dream*?!” Tommy shouted, ever one to read the room.

He does the job though, and Dream burst into laughter, stress dissipated for the moment.

“Remember, we want Skyblockle,” Sylvee piped up, before throwing her chicken.

“Seems like everyone wants Skyblockle anyways,” Clay paused, “Also, remember, survival points matter here, and—“

“The border, the bloody border, don’t forget the border,” Tommy piped up.

“Right. Let’s go, you guys, we got this.”

They did, in have, have it. An ass-clenching twenty minutes later, they’ve beaten Orange Ocelots by a whooping thousand points, double what was needed to take their second place spot. Techno’s Pink Parrots were firmly anchored in first, but second was all they needed to advance to the Dodgebolt finals.

Adding to the tension, however, was a tweet from MrBeast just 2 seconds ago.

Mr Beast @mrbeast

Dream VS Techno again?! Alright, whoever’s team wins MCC, gets 10,000 USD. WHO DO YOU THINK WILL WIN?

George was now, as far as Dream could tell, babbling in nervousness, shouting out strategies over Tommy trying to get a word in.

“Listen, I’m gonna be human meat shield, okay,” Sylvee said, her tense voice cutting through the drivel. “I’ll distract them.”

“You’re fine, you’re fine,” Dream mumbled, strafe jumping pointlessly around the lobby just to keep his fine motor muscles engaged. “Guys, remember, okay. Funnel me arrows, target Techno, strafe unpredictably. We trained for this, we’re good. We win these.”

“Yes, Dream!” How Tommy’s voice sounded like endless capslock, Dream thought, only a little despairingly, he did not know. “We win these!” His loud shout echoed.

The arena loaded in around them, and Dream braced himself. The moment the timer went off, he rushed off, an urgent dash to grab the arrows. If he could take out Techno before Techno even had the chance to take a shot, they would have such an advantage.

He shifted in his chair, getting ready, and when Techno paused for just a second on screen, Dream took aim.

Boom, one down. Three more to go.

They spent the next three rounds trading shots— George managed to take out half of Techno's team last two rounds, which was so clutch of him, but proceeded to die first in the forth round, bringing their final scores to a tied 2-2.

Which meant this fifth round was going to determine it all. The in-game chat was unexpectedly intense, the contestants split down the middle on who they were rooting for, and Dream could feel the adrenaline pumping through him, his heartbeat pounding in his own fingertips.

The pressure was on. Dream's no stranger to this, having been in more high stress situations than he cared to think about. He was familiar with how this went. He let himself feel the weight of his nervousness, before letting it fade back out alongside the rest of the world. These moments are some of the calmest ones in his life— with his vision zoned in, and his body tense in preparation, little else mattered except for what was right in front of him. The mundane buzz of everyday drivel were easily stripped away, his focus fixated on a singular target, his concentration zeroing in on a singular concern.

Which was, right now, to win this last fucking round of Dodgebolt.

First arrow. George fired at Sapnap, missed.

Second arrow, Sapnap at Sylvee. Hit. Fuck. 3v4.

Third arrow, Techno at Dream. Missed.

Dream had both arrows now, and Tommy was screaming in his ear to let him shoot instead, something about "hot fucking hands", so he dropped one. Tommy aimed, and took out Scott. 3v3.

Dream aimed, taking out Eret. Easy. 3v2

Now they were in a bad spot— they took out two players, sure, but Techno had both arrows, and more importantly, both Sapnap and Techno, the two best players on their team, were still alive.

“He’s going after me he’s going after me he’s *going after me*,” Tommy was screeching, as Dream was shouting back, “back and forth strafing Tommy dodge dodge dodge *dodge*,” with George unhelpfully screaming, rather incoherently, in the background. Still, it was too late. Techno hit, and just like that, it was 2v2.

2v2 in the last round of Dodgebolt. Dream and George versus Techno and Sapnap, and each team had one arrow.

Neither team was willing to make the first shot, knowing, just *knowing*, that they’ll be KO-ed in the time it would take for them to aim.

“This is not good this is not good Dream this is *not good*,” George spat out, voice low as his fingers jittered over his keyboard.

“I know,” Dream’s voice was barely above a low hiss.

“Get away from each other, fucking stop covering each other!” Tommy shouted in the background, being useful in his panic for once.

“It’s fine *it’s going to be fine*,” Dream let out through gritted teeth, making sure his jumps were as unpredictable as possible.

Sapnap stood still for just one second, and Dream panicked, worried that Sapnap was aiming at him, so he shot at him, instantaneous. He released his arrow reflexively, the motion almost subconscious. He barely realized he’d acted until he’d already let go of his shot.

The good news? Dream’s shot connected, on account of how Sapnap didn’t actually have the arrow. The bad news? Techno did. And he made use of the confusion to take aim at George.

The real bad news? Techno's shot also hit. Just like that, both George and Sapnap were out.

It was Dream versus Techno now, one on one, like some sick fan's wet dream. Both had one arrow each.

Dream let out a breath he didn't even know he was holding, his world zeroing down further, barely even hearing George's truly terrifying scream. "I'm dead I'm dead Dream *I am fucking dead.*"

"I know, you idiot, I'll avenge your honor if you just shut the fuck up for one second, please," Dream spat back, barely registering what he was saying, his fingers slick against his mouse.

He only had one chance. He had to hit Techno when Techno aimed at him, or he was a goner. His world narrowed in, George's stressed noises and Tommy's frantic ones fading behind the increasing buzz in his ears. Everyone was working themselves into a frenzy but him.

Why would he? He knew he had this in the bag.

Techno paused, for a millisecond, and raised his bow. Dream sucked in an inhale, loud, vaguely aware of George shouting "now now now *now*," in the background, and took his shot.

Techno missed.

Dream did not.

The Red Rabbits won the Minecraft Championships.

The world came roaring back in a rush, Tommy's victorious shouting registering all of a sudden, but for once, he wasn't the loudest voice in the call.

"YES," George was shouting, consumed with joy, "We fucking WIN THESE!"

Elation was a good look on him. If Clay thought George looked good, soft and relaxed, in the suspense of the morning sun, well. George was even more radiant now, his happiness a contagious thing. There was no way, there was absolutely no world in which Dream didn't join in with George's laughter when he had that jubilant look on his face.

Sylvee's victorious laughs be damned, Sapnap's cursing after he rapidly joined their voice chat forgotten, all of that came secondary to the wide spread of George's grin.

"You did it, Dream," George laughed, his joy a tangible thing. "I always knew you would."

"Yeah?" Clay smiled him, at how he turned to face Clay instead of his camera for the first time on stream.

"Yeah." George grinned, still giddy, elated. "Never even doubted it, I knew you would do it." His smile turned soft, into a precious, personal thing. Clay could do nothing but smile, pleased.

"I knew you would win it for us. I KNEW IT!" George was back to shouting, back to his reckless elation. "I love you SO MUCH, Dream."

The words were barely done being shouted out of George's mouth when he'd realized what he'd done. He froze, his eyes suspended wide with growing shock. Dream could almost see the reality rushing back into him all at once, his body locking up. His eyes flitted to the camera and back, panic seeping into his expression.

The roaring in Dream's ears faded back to normal, registering now how Tommy's laughter was fading out in confusion, and how Dream's own heart was thudding in his chest. Dimly, he noted that George's hands were turning white from how hard he was gripping his chair.

Alright. His world just got turned on its head for a little bit. And as much as Clay wanted to crow, wanted to sweep George up, say I love you back, you absolute idiot; as much as he wanted to tackle George and tell him how much that meant to him, he held back. He could read the horror in George's face, but he couldn't read why. George was visibly freaked out, obviously uncomfortable. Poor George probably didn't mean to do that on stream, but it was fine. That's a minor problem. Dream could fix that.

Dream was fairly sure he could fix anything, actually, if only to make the pinched look on

George's face go away.

Easier said than done, of course. The reasonable thing to do was to spin it like George was kidding, like this was just another joke, which was not that difficult given how Tommy immediately started screaming with cackling laughter. George played his part, teasing Dream about how he'll only hear those words again when they win again. Still, the terse glances he was still periodically sending Dream's way told Dream that he was more stressed than he let on.

Techno joined their voice chat just as Tommy was tiring himself out, which served as a good distraction. Sapnap tore into George for missing his shot, while George rubbed his victory back in his face, neither party mentioning the accidental, uh, confession? that just happened. Which, Dream's chat seemed split on whether or not it was serious, but #ILOVEYOU DREAM was already trending on Twitter, so like, Clay tried, he guessed.

"Alright, alright, guys, calm down. We figured out it takes a Championship win for George to admit his undying love for me, it's not that big of a deal." Clay teased, steering the conversation back to safer ground.

"Yeah, sorry, I only like you after you've got good," George bugged back, and Sapnap, god save his soul, promptly decided to be useful by changing the topic and started bugging Dream about his final kill shot instead.

"Gotta go pee," were the first words that rushed out of George's mouth after both their streams ended.

Clay hummed, not thinking too much of it, leaning back in his chair to pull up Twitter instead.

Well, that was a mistake, he realized, closing the app out of instinct. Survival instinct. He rolled his eyes, allowing himself a singular deep breath before diving back into the mess that was Twitter.

Right. Control the chaos. Seriously, if only George hadn't made such a big deal out of this in the

past in the first place. This was all so unnecessary.

Part of him couldn't help but be pleased, though, humming with quiet satisfaction, floating on a high. He'd known, obviously. George may not have said it with his big boy words before, but Clay wasn't blind. He knew what it meant when a pretty boy brought you breakfast in bed. When he fed you chicken noodle soup when you were violently sick, despite knowing you were just gonna puke it back up later. He knew what it meant when George sent him [duck bonking videos at 2am](#).

Still, though. He was still gonna tuck away the memory of George's eyes, crinkling up into half moons, the radiant way he exuded happiness as he told Clay that he *loved* him. He was going to fold this memory up carefully, store it in a special place, and then go kiss the ever-loving god out of George in a moment. Soon.

Now, though, it was probably time for damage control. George was private, that much was obvious. He definitely wouldn't want people privy to the true (if nebulous) nature of their relationship.

Dream @DreamWasTaken

Successfully bought @GeorgeNotFound's love, finally. All it took was to kill @Technothepig and win him a crown #expensivedate #notworthit

Technoblade @Technothepig Replied:

The price of my life...

Tommyinnit @Tommyinnit Replied:

I WOULD LIKE TO BE A PART OF THIS CONVERSATION! #DREAMNOTFOUND

dream @dreamwastaken2

Lol guys it was all in good fun, don't take it too seriously. George and I are friends, of course we love each other.

Tubbo @Tubbo

LOL @GeorgeNotFound FRIENDZONED

*

*

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• +°*•••(george)••*°+ •
* * *

He would never want to admit it, but it's fair to say that in the aftermath of his, uh, accidental confession, George runs.

He makes up some bullshit excuse about needing to pee, before promptly bolting himself inside the bathroom, hands shaking, the tips of his fingers numb.

He wasn't supposed to do that. He definitely wasn't supposed to do that. He doesn't know how he kept it together enough to pass it off as a joke afterwards, when every one of Clay's dismissive glances and every single "no big deals" impaled a shot of ice cold dread right into his jugular.

Fuck. Listen. George doesn't know exactly what he was saving it for, okay, but he was saving it for *something*. Not for a fucking MCC tournament stream, not in front of 50k people, that's for sure. 300k, actually, if you count Clay's stream. He got caught up in the moment, all of tension from the tournament released in one fell swoop of relief when Dream won. He forgot about the people watching, about how he was in public, really, if you thought about it.

In the moment, all he saw was Clay's side profile, smug in his joy, and all he felt was pride, and undeniable joy. How could George have even tried to subdue the crash of fondness that bowled right into him? How could he have done anything else in face of his adoration that threatened to beat out of his chest?

He let his head drop into his hands, sick of supporting it. He just— he wasn't meant to just show the whole world.

To make matters worse, his worse fears had come true. The casual way Dream— Clay?— Dream played it off fucking hurt. How easily he steered it into a joke, all while George was still frozen with fear and shock. Like it meant nothing to him, when George just put his whole heart out there for the whole world to see.

Some part of George's brain, the part that was still somehow staying rational through it all, knew that that was what Dream had to do. Knew they had to spin things flippantly unless they wanted to fucking out themselves in front of their entire audience, which, just the idea of that sent a chill up his spine.

Still, it hurt. He was man enough to admit that he was terrified, here. Terrified with how vulnerable he felt, his feelings turned inside out, splayed open for all to see. Terrified with how easily Clay shrugged it off. He think he deserves some leniency, here, for running, for thinking the worst. Reading Dream's tweets as they rolled in just twisted the knife that he had already driven deep into himself. "Friendzoned"? Jeez.

iMessage

From: clayblock

George

Babe

It's not a big deal

Cmon, no one thought you were being serious, its okay

You can leave the bathroom anytime now

We'll never speak about this again if you want

It's not that big of a deal cmon

Fuck. He put a palm onto his left eye, willing the tears that'd welled up to stop.

The jingle on his phone had him opening the eye not covered by his hand. Oh, great. Now the whole circus was here.

“Tell me you’re not freaking out right now,” was apparently how Sapnap decided to greet him.

“I’m not fr-freaking out right now.” George’s cracking voice maybe gave his lie away.

“Bro, chill out, I think you’re good. The fans seem to think its just a huge joke. This isn’t worse than the time you worked up to it at the end of that 8-hour stream last year.”

“It is,” George whined, petulant. He blinked away a tear angrily. “I wasn’t dating him then.”

“Oh, so now you admit you’re dating,” Nick muttered, sarcastic. “What, so there’s no plausible deniability on it being romantic this time? Who the fuck is gonna know that? Only Clay’s gonna know the full weight of the words, man.”

Plausible deniability, George mouthed. Sometimes people forget that Nick was probably the smartest amongst them all.

“Congrats, Sap, you just identified precisely the problem.”

“What? Only Clay knows it to be the love declaration that it was? How’s that a problem?” Nick’s tone was turning suspicious. “Do you… not actually love him?”

“I fucking do,” George hissed, the words choking up in his throat. “I love him with my whole heart and he thinks the whole thing is a huge joke.”

“Bro,” Sapnap’s voice was drier than the desert. “If you couldn’t tell that Dream was kidding about it being a joke, if you couldn’t tell that was just to get the fans off your back, you’re kidding me.”

“Yeah? So why’d he just text me telling me it wasn’t a big deal and I can stop being embarrassed about it any time now?”

“What?!”

George was so tired. So tired of the lights that wouldn't stop shining into his eyes. So tired at how he was living one life and running from it at the same time.

"He thinks it's not a big deal, Nick. Nick. Nick, he's the world to me." George's tone was flat, exhausted now.

"That's not how Clay is," Nick insisted.

George thought about how different Clay could be. The Clay he knew in the private moments between a blink of the eye and the reddening of his cheeks was a different Clay than the one that called into Tommy's stream with his honking laughs. Was a different Clay from the easygoing one around his parents. Was a different Clay from Dream.

There were so many Clays to keep track of, sometimes. There were quite a few Georges, as well. Can you really blame him for getting caught up in the show of it all?

"That's not how Clay is," George echoed, suddenly angry, his voice turning into a loud, mockingly cruel thing. "Tell me, Sapnap, tell me to my fucking face, do you really know who Clay is?"

Behind all that bluster and pride, there was a person. But right now, in the edges where Dream blurred into Clay, where public and private and intersected, George was lost in the words that weren't being said.

Most of all, he was tired. So, so tired.

"I love him," and his voice was quiet now, barely above a whisper. "You know I think I do. But you didn't see the way he looked at me, Sap."

He leaned back, sick of the effort it took to support his own weight. "It didn't matter to him at all."

Dream had reassured the fans too effectively. So effectively that he'd convinced George as well.

$$\underset{*}{\bullet} + {}^{\circ} * \cdot \underset{\cdot}{\underset{\cdot}{\circ}} \langle \quad \text{fade} \quad \rangle \underset{\cdot}{\underset{\cdot}{\circ}} \cdot * {}^{\circ} + \underset{*}{\bullet}$$

“Tell me to my fucking face, do you really know who Clay is?”

George's voice was so short, so clipped. Clay's never heard him use this tone before.

Clay's heart froze, dropping right down to the pit in his stomach.

He wasn't a total idiot—a minute ago, he wondered why George hadn't come back yet, and then swiftly realized that he was probably freaking out silently in the washroom by himself. Clay had bit his lip, concerned, before promptly setting out to go fish him out of his hidey hole and comfort him. To tell him it was okay, to tell him hey, guess what, he loved him right back, they can commence with the celebratory make outs now that their fans were thoroughly assured of it being a joke. George probably ran to have an entire breakdown about this all getting out to the public, but yo, it was just three words. It wasn't a big deal. Nothing they couldn't play off. Let their fans think it was a joke. They knew what it meant to them.

But when he closed in on the bathroom, he'd heard George's voice rising, agitated in an urgent way unfamiliar to Clay. Clay had paused, and he didn't mean to eavesdrop, but George was talking so loudly, just a door away, right there.

Saying those words that hit Clay right where it mattered, right there, too.

George didn't know who Clay was? Was George fucking kidding. He's been living out of my bedroom for the past two months, Clay thought, and he doesn't know who I am?

For the first time in a long while, Clay fucked up. He miscalculated. George didn't run because he

was freaked out. He ran because he didn't trust Dream be who he said he was. If Dream knew one thing about George, it's that he only commits when he's sure of something.

And of course, how could he be sure of them, if he couldn't be sure of Dream?

Suddenly, everything made sense. Everything from George's reluctance to say the words, even in private, to his hushed phone calls with Sapnap with his door closed.

He ran because he'd let the wrong thing slip, in the heat of the moment.

He ran because he didn't mean it.

*

Chapter End Notes

oops :D

as always, feel free send me your questions on tumblr. a lil [treat](#)

also [dream voice] ao3 statistics show that only a small percentage of readers actually drop a kudos— /j /j

(but if you did like it, comments and kudos mean the world. truly ♥)

next update will probably be ~a week again, if i don't get distracted writing other dnf fic! should be last chapter! home run you guys lets GO! if u clicky click the subscribe button ao3 sends u an email when i post the next chapter! <3 (also can someone lemme know if ao3 sends u an email each time i edit the work because is so OOPS SORRY)

check out my other dnf fics [what he wants](#) | [somerse lane](#)

also follow me on twitter! @jamingbenn

these tentatively gleaming lights

Chapter Notes

hi yes [kicks elephant out of the way] sorry this is late!!! but you might be able to tell why from the [squints] 10k more words these next two chapters are.

might be helpful to read back the last couple of chapters!! its been a while, i know, sorry!!

fyi, this fic is only canon-compliant up till, like, early september. the meet up is real in this, the vlog is real in this, bla bla bla, but still, remember that these are fake characters with fake personalities <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*

Strange, wasn't it, how even in the height of summer, his apartment stayed frigidly cold.

Maybe it wasn't the apartment's fault. Maybe it was just the withering of his own heart.

Alright— Clay has his moments of dramatics, he'll admit, but it doesn't feel like he's exaggerating this time.

He had walked away from where George was hiding in the bathroom, resolute, no matter the fact that his soul was shattering with each further step he took. George's cruel, mocking words still ringing in his head.

Screw him, Clay had thought, biting back the well of hot terror with sheer resentment. If George didn't trust him after all that he's— after all they've been through, there wasn't much Clay could do. Except to nurse his own fracturing heart; to wallow in self sympathy for as long as his ego'll allow.

To really revel in just how pathetic he was, time and time again, diving into something heart first, too fast, too eager to be loved.

How foolish he was. To think that he'd be loved.

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• + ° * • • ☺ (*george*) • ☺ • * ° + • *

In the 15 minutes George spent in the bathroom, in the short time it takes for Clay to tweet out the tweet that breaks his heart, and to text him the message that twists the knife, what tentatively blossoming relationship they had scorches itself dry.

There was nothing left for George to do but play along.

This is the unfortunate conclusion he came to, after hanging up on Nick, sitting woodenly on their bathroom tile, the ringing in his ears drowning out the angry slam of Clay's door.

George was going to play along. He was going to agree with Clay, to let him know that indeed, none of this was a big deal, haha, what a funny joke, and they could all move on.

Right?

Right.

To love is to— is to flay himself open to the world, to expose the most tender bits of him, the bits rubbed raw with fear. To love is to let himself be known, down to the very core of his own being that even he himself wished to avoid.

But because of some sick twist of fate, and because fate had it out to spite just him in particular, George had to have the job where to love was to show the frenzied crowd what they sought to see the most, to know and to claim as if their own. To have every move scrutinized. To not even have his emotions as his own.

And to think he went through all that just to have the object of his affections laugh in the face of it, and then to be rejected with only a cruel, joking dismissal— George doesn't think he's overreacting, here.

To love is to be vulnerable. And it's fair to be terrified by that, if you asked him. To therefore keep all his squishiest parts fiercely guarded, locked down, covered in layers upon layers of obsidian.

But obsidian isn't bedrock, and even bedrock can be broken.

And then there's just holes revealing what no one was ever supposed to know.

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Clay didn't know that he could feel this cold.

Not even when he was well and truly by himself, the couple of months after Maddie moved out, did the house feel this— this *barren*. This subdued and foreign. Everywhere he looked, it seemed like, he saw places where George should be, which was fucked up, because George *was here*.

And didn't Clay know it.

George was everywhere— sidestepping away from Clay on his way out of the kitchen just as he walked in, turning on the shower right after Clay stepped out of his sound-isolated room, socked feet padding on the floor to get to the door.

And still he was nowhere. His PS5 controller was gathering dust, their non-stick pan neatly stowed away instead of left dirty in the sink. He wasn't slumped in his favorite spot on their couch, a spot that just had some sad, vaguely humanoid indent now, empty where a person used to sit.

It's been two weeks of this. Two weeks of tiptoeing around, not because he felt like a stranger in his own house, but because the house felt strange. On edge, all the time, trying to figure out just what was wrong.

Which was a futile effort, of course, because Clay knew exactly what that was.

His own damn house didn't feel like home anymore unless it was shared with George.

They couldn't avoid each other forever, both in-person and online.

By this point, they've run through the backlog of content they've saved up, and they had to record something together or fans were gonna get suspicious.

Clay wasn't a coward, okay, especially not when his career was on the line. He just— he needed more time. At least by now they could somewhat coexist in the same room without either of them

plotting a grand escape.

Instead, there was a shared, mutual sense of moderate internal combustion, but that was okay. That they could get used to, maybe.

Clay'll ask. Eventually. When he stops jumping every time he see's George's silhouette in his peripheral vision. When his body stops reaching for another that's not there.

When the gravity inside of him stops spinning out of wack, just waiting to be realigned again.

It's been weeks, but Clay's sure they'll be fine in due time.

Take today, for example. It was almost normal, what with Clay puttering about the kitchen to scrounge together breakfast at, uh, noon, apparently, if he's not reading his watch wrong.

George's out there in the living room, absentmindedly scrolling through his phone. Or at least he was, when Clay last walked past him. Which was also the last time he dared to sneak a quick look at him, at George's face held so carefully still, his gaze dutifully trailed on his phone. Refusing to look at a sleep rumpled Clay with almost painful deliberateness.

Well, it's good that he's been in the living room more, Clay frowned, thinking of how George must've only come outside to sneak a cuddle with Patches.

The peanut butter on his sandwich was being unfairly difficult today. He frowned harder, knife threatening to tear right through the bread, when his phone sounded, the shrill ringtone piercing through the weighted silence of the room. Clay jumped, and the knife slipped off the bread to nick at his hand.

"Fuck," he swore, pinching the cut, as George's head snapped up at all the commotion.

They both paused on Clay's still ringing phone, steadily vibrating its way across the table, heedless of the scrutiny it was under. Clay sighed, and reached for it with his good hand.

"Good morning," he said, as if on autopilot.

“Good morning,” Sapnap agreed. “Put me on speakerphone.”

“What?” Clay managed, like an idiot.

“Is George there?”

Clay’s eyes happily betrayed him, eager for an excuse to look at the British man, who currently appeared fascinated by the coffee table. “Yes,” Clay answered, half weary, half suspicious.

“Good! Put me on speakerphone.” Sapnap repeated, sounding dangerously cheerful.

Clay complied, his hands a little sweaty.

Sapnap’s voice muffled voice on speakerphone was even more artificially sunny. “Hey George! Hope you’re well. I know this is unexpected, but it’s been really rude of you guys to have your little bachelor pad for months now and still not extend a single invitation to me, your other best friend.”

“I’m sorry—“

“Oh, don’t apologize,” Sapnap answered, his predatory grin audible through the phone. “Thankfully for you both, I’ve long since gotten used to your idiocy, which is why I saw fit to solve this problem for you.”

What?! Clay looked over to George, and for the first time in weeks their eyes met, equally frantic on both ends.

“Anyways, I just left the airport, in an Uber, eta 15 minutes. Receive me with warmth.”

Well, that was bound to be really fucking easy, wasn’t it, given how his house hasn’t felt warm once in the past two weeks. This fucking icy tension was going to be a cakewalk to break, I’m sure, Nick.

Before Clay could snappily make that sentiment known, he was interrupted by the loud dial tone of Nick hanging up. Clay shut his eyes slowly, letting the annoyance wash over him.

When he opened them back up, George still looking at him, his eyes wide, his body tense. So, no different from any other day this week, then.

What *would* be a first for this week, was if they actually managed to do something together. And about that—

“Fuck,” they said feelingly, in complete and utter unison.

Ah. *That’s* the good ole Dream and George show.

Divide and conquer was not a strategy Dream and George engaged in frequently, given how clingy George usually was, but this time, it was obviously the best choice.

Wordlessly, Clay and George split up to make their house guest friendly somehow— they weren’t usually slobs, but they also just went through two weeks of pretty full-on moping, so. The apartment was a bit of a sad sight right now.

George’s room had plenty of evidence for his weeklong binge of McDonald’s deliveries, which he now had to clear away. That very night after their fight, he’d cooked their standard dinner for two, and had, as usual, opened his mouth to let Clay know that dinner was ready.

And then promptly had nausea overwhelm him, just at the thought of having to force food down opposite of Clay.

He had thrown the leftovers away that day. (And called for delivery every evening after that.) Which, he could admit now, hastily shoving greasy cardboard into the garbage, might have been a little bit of an overreaction.

Clay was in no better shape, of course. After hanging up on Nick, (which, pretty sure Nick actually hung up on him, but Clay needed every illusion of agency at this point), he ran straight to his room, rushing to delete his internet and Minecraft server history. Sapnap *will* ask to try out his expensive PC set up at some point and, well. Clay really didn't need Nick to see that he'd done absolutely nothing "productive" in the past week but angrily beat Minecraft records on now-defunct servers.

And also existing servers.

He also didn't need Sapnap to witness his endless trawl through r/relationship_advice on Reddit, spitefully relishing in other's misery to feel a little better about his own sad state of affairs.

(Of course, Sapnap already knew all of this. Listen, BloodGods6969 wasn't an original alt name, okay, Dream, you fucking Technoblade stannie.)

Precisely 21 minutes after the dreaded phone call had them miraculously working together for once, Clay and George stood, six feet apart, posture stiff and faces tense, hovering on opposite sides of their living room, eyes glued to their front door.

George shifted his weight from one foot to the other, having given up on keeping himself still. Well, he was always worse at hiding his shiftiness. "So," he tried, the question he meant to ask catching in his throat.

"Yeah, I don't know either," Clay answered anyway.

George inhaled slowly, frustrated with the answers he wasn't getting. Clay rolled his eyes a little—he, too, had his fists clenched with stress, but what else were they to do, tell Nick to fly back? They didn't have much of a choice.

Or a choice at all.

As far as Clay was concerned, they were going to sit through Sapnap's fury, and then act like none of this ever happened. All while pretending that his heart wasn't being hydraulic pressed into a pathetic goo of pain, but he'll take that over the emasculation, thanks.

In other words, he'll be fine.

"Cool," George answered, his tone anything but. He managed, finally, to tear his gaze away from Clay's tight jaw when the lock on their apartment door clicked open.

God-fucking-damnit. George knew giving Sapnap the code to their apartment was a bad idea.

Sapnap swept in, bearing nothing but with a threateningly cheery smile and two suitcases.

"Good morning," he greeted them.

"Good morning," Clay answered, spreading his hands open. "Welcome to our humble abode."

Sapnap looked around, whistled at their admittedly pretty self indulgent 65-inch flatscreen TV, before turning back to face his two idiot friends.

Which. His said idiot friends were standing so still, you'd think the air was hurting them.

Nick couldn't help it— he started laughing.

"You two are not ruining this with your fucking temper tantrums," he cheerfully announced. "Guess what? We're going to fucking Olive Garden, and we're all going to have a nice little meal, like the happy little friend group that we are."

Clay had the good sense to not sigh out loud, but judging by George's long, pained exhale, he was the only one.

Well. What Sapnap wants, Sapnap gets, Clay supposed.

That, and it would be nice to not eat alone for once this month.

“Did you know,” Sapnap said, “that Olive Garden was founded in Florida? It’s why I always wanted to visit one here. Pay homage, you know. It’s the em-eff-ing OG.”

“Aren’t Texans supposed to be snobby about fast food?” Clay said, absentmindedly scanning through the menu. Why were they always adding weird new “seasonal” shit here, anyway?

“Listen,” Sapnap pointed an accusing finger back at Clay. “I can be snobby about Whataburger and still acknowledge the beauty of Olive Garden. It’s the fucking land of the *endless pasta*.” His voice went dreamy there, towards the end, his hands folded under his chin.

“You Americans have no idea how much you disrespect food,” George frowned at something called the “Shrimp Scampi Fritta”. Was there anything Americans wouldn’t fry?

“Hey, just because we know how to appreciate it doesn’t mean we don’t respect it. Yo— what the fuck’s a [Dew Garita](#)?” Nick paused, shoving his menu in Clay’s face. “A fucking Mountain Dew margarita?”

Clay pulls a face, disgusted. “Ew.”

“I’m ordering it,” Nick decides, gleeful.

When the drink arrives, it’s bright green.

George stares into its fizzing depths and wills himself not to think of Dream’s skin.

Dinner starts out bad.

There's no way around that. Nick must have been feeding his own positivity off of the general negativity— there's no other explanation for how peppy he managed to stay, and with such spiteful relentlessness, too.

George's reluctantly impressed, and actually kind of jealous, at how Nick seemed completely blind to the gargantuan elephant in the room, the one whose giant elephant heartbeat he was sure he could hear ringing in his ears.

Or maybe that was just his own.

Either way, the elephant was very difficult to ignore, having made itself very much at home, triumphant in its supernatural size.

George let out a steady breath. He just wanted— wished things could be normal again.

He wanted to be 'just' hanging out with his best friends. A month ago, this would've been a dream — making fun of America's monstrous portions and bastardization of good Italian food while Nick and Clay pretended to be offended.

Now, though. All he could feel was the cloying tension in the room, closing in on him, suffocating the air out of his lungs. Every breath he took was a strained struggle— each inhale a fight against the room's heavy atmosphere.

When George tuned back into the conversation, Sapnap was sounding amused. “Bro, we aren't talking shop in Olive Garden, come on.”

“I'm just— we don't have anything queued up for next week!” Clay protested, annoyed.

“We don't have to,” Sapnap said mildly. “Besides, worse come to worst, George'll just have to release the vlog.”

The familiarity of this bit shook George out of his daze. “Hey!” He complained, sharp, but it was joking now, playful. “Listen, no one even wants that anymore, okay, get with the times. Now they just want the house tour.”

“Which isn’t going to happen,” Clay chirped right back, “unless we want them to know about how we’ve been hiding Sapnap in the closet.”

“You two have no right to be talking about closets!” Sapnap threw his hands in the air, and they were all laughing now, the banter easy again, all the usual teasing with only a little bit of edge.

The elephant seemed newly engrossed with something on the other side of the room, plodding his way over, and George found that he could breathe a little easier, a little lighter.

The air thinned just a little bit, and it— it was kind of nice now, what with Clay and Sapnap on the verge of a food fight, their honking laughs competing for volume. George tried out a little smile, and hey. Maybe this wasn’t so bad after all.

Maybe underneath this giant mess they’ve found themselves in, they still were just— three mates. Just three mates, hanging out with each other, because despite all that been happening, they still just— really like each other’s company.

Clay and George seemed to have forgotten that memo for a little bit back there, but hey. They’ve picked it back up now. And it was fine. There was still plenty more conversation to go around.

Only once— maybe twice— did George let a joke slip with just a little too much bite, and have Clay go quiet, avoiding his eye.

Still, they were trying. A little for Nick’s sake, but mostly for their own. Give them some credit— they really were trying, just to be as normal as they could, to not ruin Nick’s trip here, barely remembering in time how to just fuck about and have some fun with each other.

So dinner goes by fine. It goes by in a haze of shitty drinks, hearty food and heartier laughs. George even manages to forget how he’s technically still fighting with Clay, a couple of times.

George, who's just as surprised as you are, somehow manages to have a good time.

The exhaustion from traveling and from being an afternoon's worth of comic relief must have finally caught up with Sapnap. He's quiet on their way home, the rev of Clay's engine taking over the soundscape of the night.

The hum of Clay's Tesla was comforting. Clay liked driving— enough to splurge on an, admittedly, pretty self-indulgent Tesla. But he did find a certain kind of soothing comfort in driving, in paring down his senses to focus solely on the road ahead. It was a reliable way to unwind after a stressful day, and let's face it, the day had been pretty intense.

A quick glance back informed him that George was watching the world go by, silent, while Nick seemed content to fiddling about on his phone. And so Clay lets himself relax a little— holding himself a little looser, his posture a little less strained.

He doesn't catch the moment when George gives up, and lets himself just look.

George couldn't help it. Not by then. He's tired and he— he gives up, okay. His gaze had caught on the curve of Clay's fingertips, and try as he might, he couldn't look away. Not from the shape of them rested easily on the steering wheel, not from the stroke of his thumb gentle against the coarse grain of the leather.

He was tired of snuffing out his endless fascination with the wrinkle between Clay's eyebrows, of resisting the delicate dimpling of Clay's skin that his hands itched to touch.

It didn't matter how sternly he tried to command his gaze, to look away, look outside, at something, please, anything, that wasn't Clay's face, but George was just realizing now, maybe that was always going to be a fruitless endeavor.

These were all the things he hadn't let himself feel for the past three weeks. All the things he didn't even realize he was missing until here they were again, the contrast of Clay's dark hair against his pale skin a hopelessly captivating sight. And so here was George, drinking it all in with a satisfaction that burned as he swallowed.

He didn't know it, but his fingers were twitching against his thigh. Brushing up against a ghost of what he really wanted to touch.

Well. Add that to the list of things George didn't know then, being silently driven into the night.

The goodwill from dinner hadn't completely dried up by the time they got back to their apartment. Between the three of them, they manage to sort out the pullout sofa-bed they bought with Sapnap in mind. Well, sorted somewhat, at least until Nick decided to pull out his Nintendo switch.

"Oh no," George said, voice grave, slack hands dropping the duvet he was unfolding.

"Oh yes," Sapnap countered, a devilish grin playing on his face.

"What's up?" Clay asked, oblivious to the terror that was about to descent onto this realm. Pure, Sapnap-induced, otherworldly terror.

George feels a familiar fear sinking into him. That glint in Nick's eye has never meant anything good.

After all, the last time he sounded like this, he took a cross country flight just to spite his friends.

Nick laughed at Clay's blank cluelessness. "It's Super Smash Bros time, baby!" He crowed.

It goes so poorly. It is almost indescribable, just how poorly it went. George truly doesn't know how he didn't foresee this, given how competitive he knows they are, but the chaos. No one could have predicted this level of chaos.

Sapnap and Clay end up in a head lock, their controllers forgotten on one side, while George giggled and screeched for them to "just play the game, oh my god, stop *throwing*," but good luck hearing that over Sapnap's incoherent shouts about his "DONKEY HONOR FOR THE DONKEY

KONG KING”.

The pair crashed the floor with a loud thump, Clay rolling out from underneath of Nick, laughing so hard he was clutching at his sides, face red.

“Are you two gonna come back and fight me or is this just single player now?” George asked, amused.

“Fuck... off...” Clay managed, wheezing with every word. “Oh, man. I can’t even stand up, I have side cramps from laughing too hard.”

“Because you have no HONOR!” Sarnap shouted, punching his fists into the air, setting Clay off into another laughing fit again.

Sarnap turned his head, grinning when he met George’s eye. “Having fun yet?” Nick mouthed at him, all while George was shaking his head to himself, turning his attention back to the screen, where Clay’s Kirby lay dead to Sarnap’s Donkey Kong.

If George had a choice, if his every wish was God’s command, he would choose to spend the rest of his life in this moment. Sure, George was being inundated with absolutely gleeful mayhem, but it was mayhem that he belonged in, here where his skin felt comfortable and his grin just unremovable.

George wasn’t a religious man, but if he were ever to start praying, it would be to pray for forever this. To be frozen still in this time, his ears ringing with the easy, happy sound of Clay’s laughter. Both of their eyes shining bright with the simple joy of being by his best friends.

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It was too quiet.

Well, that wasn't strictly true. You could never really shake the distant hum of traffic anywhere in Orlando, not even this late. The gentle whirring of his fan was still audible, too, and whenever he turned, his bed creaked as it always did.

Still, it was too quiet for George. Especially after the earlier ruckus of an evening. The soft background noises weren't enough to wash over his buzzing thoughts, and the silence remained too disconcerting for him to fall into an easy slumber, however exhausted he was from his day of pretense.

Sleep wasn't going to come by easy tonight. He couldn't just— he was missing something. Something like the steady rhythm of Clay's breath, maybe. The quiet tapping of his fingers on his phone. The rustle of another person sharing their space with him.

This isn't a new discovery, necessarily, only one that he just now let himself confront. It was easier to ignore the oppressive silence when he was still teeth grittingly mad at Clay, when he was still too busy wallowing in his own misery.

But it was harder now, after a day of watching the corners of Clay's eyes wrinkle with joy. After a day of letting the vicious dimple in Clay's cheek strike something deep within him.

George was tired. He was so, so tired. Too tired to bear through this silence, a silence so loud it hummed, this silence that was pressing in, on, down; that was buzzing straight through him somehow.

George's eyes opened, but the pitch black darkness of his room inspired no better answer.

Fuck. Okay, then.

Patches was curled outside of his door.

“And what are you doing here, little buddy?” He asked, voice low, amused.

Patches made a soft noise back at him, tucking her head underneath a paw. George had thought that she went back to sleeping in Clay’s bed, since he started shutting his door again, but evidently not.

Well, this was as good an excuse as he was going to get, he figured. George scooped Patches up into the crook of his arm, smiling a little at how she settled right in.

The dark wood of Clay’s door had never seemed more foreboding. George lingered, letting himself take in every single dent, every tiny scratch, everything that he never gotten to observe. Clay’s door was so rarely closed— George would've never had the chance to notice these things, before.

Funny how even things could still be new to him, even in a house he’d been living in for months.

Fuck. He had to stop stalling. Clay could probably hear him already, with how he's been pacing about. He adjusted his hold on a Patches disgruntled to be woken up, nervous.

Fuck. Alright, then.

He knocked, once, twice, and opened the door.

This had seemed so simple— okay, that was a lie, this seemed very difficult even before opening the door, but now that he was here, even the words he had prepared dried up in his throat.

Wordlessly, George stepped through the crack of light he was letting in, his socked toes flexing against the floor.

Clay wasn’t asleep. A silver of his face was visible from the crack of light George was letting in, letting George see the soft furrow in his brow.

“George?” He said, voice low, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

“... Hey.” Fuck. “Patches was looking sad outside my room, so I thought I’d bring her in,” George faltered, his own voice scratchy. Trying for casual but missing by a mile.

“Huh?” Clay sat up, just a little bit. “Hey you,” he smiled, a tentative thing.

“Hey yourself,” George repeated, dumb, struck a little by Clay’s smile, directed at him in the soft haziness of the night. He stepped a little closer, barely noticing himself doing so.

Fuck, okay. George cleared his throat. He didn’t really know what to say, except—

“It’s too quiet,” he whispered, the barest rasp of a thing.

“What?” Clay asked, quiet, his voice softened to match George’s own.

“It’s too quiet,” George burst out. “In my room. So I was just— I don’t know.” He paused, frustrated. “Listen, I know you’re mad at me, but just for tonight, could I—“

He huffed, a small, defeated thing. “Could I stay?”

George didn’t see it, but Clay’s shoulders sagged, jerky, as he let out a soft breath.

The silence stretched, infinite in its possibilities, but of course George jumped only to the worst ones. Fuck, Clay was gonna say no. He should never have asked. Why did he ask? Had he not humiliated himself enough, this month alone?

“Yeah,” Clay finally said, voice was so faint George thought he might've dreamt it.

When he looked up again, Clay was already looking right back at him.

His gaze was heavy, laden with the weight of crossing the space between them, the space they've set up, that they still had to cross. George wanted to close his eyes, the contact too painful, Clay's weariness bared so openly for him to see. But he couldn't, rooted as he was, Clay's careful gaze keeping him teetered to the floor.

George kept their distance, not daring to venture into the bubble of Clay's space, not until—

“Yeah,” Clay repeated. “Stay.”

*

Chapter End Notes

YES THE [DEW GARITA](#) IS A REAL THING, IN CASE YOU DIDN'T CLICK ON THE LINK IN THE FIC. i am as horrified as you are.

also, listen, [gestures broadly] this is why you shouldn't write canon-compliant fics for rpf. because the canon CHANGES ON YOU. so yes, we're ARE proceeding like
1. the meet up was real 2. the vlog is real. [infinite screaming]

also, another reason this took so long to finish was because dream and george's dynamic changed so much irl. (seriously, the LOH thing was such a curveball) this was always just inspired by their personas, but, uh, it is basically fully oc now. in fact, dream and george have active disproved many of their characterizations in this fic.
LOLOL

had to break up these last chapters into two because of word count and because of the flow, but everything IS FINISHED, the next chapter should be up within an hour of this chapter being up (i'm trying a thing). if it's not, please let me know!

follow me on twitter!! @jamingbenn

and our souls, intertwined

Chapter Notes

LAST STRETCH POG? LAST STRETCH POG? LAST STRETCH POG!!!

also, just wanted to shout marsh, mel, and a bunch else (sav, mk, winter, abby, yada yada) out. ty for sticking with my indecisive ass and helping me pick between two functionally identical sentences. and also marsh, you're an angel, remember that.

yes this is comically late but it is also comically long (for me), so. i really didn't wanna drop another cliff hanger.

thanks for sticking with me through it all! i hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*

When George woke up the next morning, he was warm. The rumble of Patches' purring was laid over the steady sound of Clay's slow breathing, and for a moment, he forgot why this should have felt foreign.

Forgot why this wasn't just another day of waking up, surrounded by those whom he loved most.

And just in that one moment of blissful unawareness, he let himself look. At how young Clay looked while asleep. How his the line of his chest rose and fell with each breath.

George wanted to smooth his thumb over Clay's twitching eyelids, but even more than that, he didn't want to jolt Clay out of sleep. So he settled for brushing his fingers against the soft fibres of Clay's duvet instead, just to curb the itch in his hands.

Clay must not have been sleeping well, either.

His eyes were smudged with a dark purple, his cheekbones sharper than what George was used to. But in the forgiving haze of the morning, Clay still looked youthful, his hair a shade lighter, almost golden in the sun. George tracked the stripes of light from their blinds as they swayed lightly in the wind, their shadows flitting across Clay's face.

Three weeks ago, this would have just been any other morning. George might have glanced at the scene before him, letting himself fill up on warm fondness, but only for a moment, before tearing his eyes away. Would have scampered off into the kitchen, or unplugged his phone, done anything, just so Clay wouldn't wake up and catch him mid-stare.

If he was being honest with himself, he still wanted to bolt straight out of the room, just to arrest the seizing in his chest, to shut down all evidence of feeling. But he couldn't. Not today. Today he'll stay rooted, barely daring to breathe.

He needs this sunrise to linger. Just a little longer, just for this morning. He needs the time to memorize the shape of Clay's profile in the sun, before this, too, gets taken away from him. He'll take every minute he can get, just to feel the ambient warmth of Clay's body curled next to him, so open and so trusting, for what could be the last time.

Never forget that the sun is mesmerizing. Here's the thing, though.

The sun also hurts to look at.

Maybe it was a little too pathetic to admit that he had slept better last night than he had in weeks.

But be what it may, frankly. Having finally slept through the night, George was still too relieved to dwell too much on self-deprecation.

Sure, most of George wanted to run. Yet there was still a traitorous part of him that remained amazed at anyone who'd choose to leave this bed, voluntarily, for any reason at all. It was the warm part of him, the warm part of him made up of dying embers and borrowed light, made warmer still by Clay's sleeping form.

And maybe the problem was that he was still fuzzy with sleep; maybe his mind was just scrambled with fear, but his heart, his heart refused to be ignored anymore, trying valiantly to take off, weighed down with feeling as it was, but still trying so, so hard.

It hits him then. It hits him like a physical blow to the chest.

He's not ready to give this up.

He didn't want it just for this morning, just for these stolen moments he didn't earn, didn't think he deserved. George wanted—he *wants*. He wants feel settled with security. To be sure of his place next to Clay, even in the grogginess of early mornings and the exhilaration of Championship nights.

Fuck.

"Good morning." Clay's voice was rough, crackly, but his smile was gentle, soft in the sunshine. Their bodies were tangled together, calf resting over thigh, each having reached out to the other in their sleep. Neither of them made to move.

"Hey," George smiled back. He couldn't help it. "Thanks."

Clay caught his fingers around the delicate skin of George's wrist. "No big."

"Yeah, still."

"I would say anytime, but..." Clay shrugged, sheepish.

"About that—" They both started.

"No, me. Let me go first."

And George never asserts himself in that way, urgent, pushing up to lean over Clay. So Clay motioned for him to go on with one hand, feeling the tendons in George's wrist shift with his other.

George smiles a little at that, pained. He made a face. "Clay. I know these few days have been—ugh."

He shook his head, not sure how to best approach the mammoth of an elephant they've been steadily ignored for two weeks.

Well, head on, George supposed. "I just needed you to know—I wanted to apologize for the whole, uh, tantrum I threw. I was just... humiliated, I guess. I know that's been fucking the dynamic up."

He rolled his eyes a little. "I mean, it hurt me to know that you could dismiss this whole thing so easily, but I guess I shouldn't have been so surprised, how it was always a little bit of a joke to you. I mean, I definitely know now, that you don't feel the same way I do. But it's okay! I'll be fine!"

Clay's eyes were widening, and he moved to prop himself up, but George barreled on. "God, it sounds pathetic out loud, but I— It'll probably take me a little bit to get over it. I mean, I confessed on live camera, so whatever. I know that's not what you wanted from— Clay? Wait, why are you smiling? Clay! What?"

Because Clay was laughing now, little snorting noises escaping the hand he's thrown over his mouth.

He reached out to tilt George's face gently, forcing him to meet his eyes. "You're an idiot. You know that, right? You're an idiot."

George pushed Clay off, frustrated now. "Clay, I'm trying to tell you that I— I fucking love you, okay? And I'm sorry about that. I was hurt, sure, but I shouldn't have let this gotten so blown out of proportion that Sapp had to fucking fly over—"

"Yeah, shut up." Clay rolled his eyes, shifting to brace his hands on George's knees. "Listen, If there's someone here that has to apologize, apparently it's me, for getting this all wrong."

"What?"

“George. I didn’t know. I thought you didn’t mean it. I— I thought you were, I don’t know, ashamed somehow, for slipping up on stream, and I didn’t think you meant what you said. I mean, I hoped, but still.”

“You hoped?” George blinked.

“Let me finish. I thought the last two weeks were, like, you trying to distance yourself from me. I thought you just got carried away.”

“That is not what happened.” George cut in, waving his hands around. “Hello, I bared my all in front of hundreds of thousands of people and you waved me off!”

“I thought you didn’t mean it!” Clay shouted, impatient now, suddenly nothing more important than George getting this through his thick skull. “I thought you didn’t mean it, that you could never love me, that you barely knew who I was! Why do you even think— how could you even think that I didn’t love you back?”

George sat there, stunned, watching the way Clay’s eyes were going glassy, hinting at unshed tears. “I thought I might have just been— convenient. The way you acted right after I blurted— your gaze went so cold.”

“I was trying to think of a way to get you out of it, babe! I knew you wouldn’t have wanted them to know. There were *three hundred thousand people watching!* And I— George, but I’ve— I’ve kissed you to bed. I’ve made you dinner. I’ve let you hold me while I cry. I don’t know how you couldn’t just—“

“I thought it might have all been an act,” George whispered, staring at his hands. “I— I still kind of — I didn’t know, Clay. *I don’t know.*”

Clay reached down, needing to feel George’s skin on his own. “You make me smile like— like you could be doing nothing and you’re just *there* and still I’m smiling and I don’t even know why.”

He breathed. “When you’re next to me my heart sings, okay, and it couldn’t shut up if it tried. George, you’re— you make something deep inside of me light up,” and here he brought George’s hand up to rest on his solar plexus, before carrying on, “and there’s no way you didn’t—. You had

to have known that.”

“I don’t fucking know, okay, not with the way the lines got so blurred. Sometimes we stream and it’s like— everything is so much bigger. The joy is bigger, the fear even more so. There’s moments when even I forget that the camera’s off and we can stop.” George was gesturing now, a rare thing for him to do, but he didn’t quite know just how to explain that sometimes, he doesn’t know if a joke Dream told was for him, or for the crowd.

Clay exhaled, a long, steady thing. “I’m never acting when I’m with y—“

“—don’t say that. You can’t say that. You know sometimes the cameras are on. You know that’s not true.”

“But it is, George! I only ever needed to tone it down. Why would I need to play up anything, when it comes to you?”

George’s voice was quiet now, a hushed, broken thing. “I— I thought it was all a bit.”

And then Clay’s lips were on his.

Sudden, but so, so familiar. Coaxingly tender against his own. George let him in, his lips parting instinctively. Letting himself sink into the warm heat of Clay’s mouth. Feeling how the rough pad of Clay’s thumb brushed up against the nape on his neck, feeling the soft tingles down his spine.

He whined when Clay pulled away, too soon, always too soon, never long enough, opening his eyes slowly, like he’d been drugged. Blinking in the daze of the light.

Clay was looking right back at him, eyes hard, gaze striking.

“So,” he asked. “Did that feel like a bit to you?”

“Think about it,” Clay had continued, giving a dry chuckle before he swept out of the room.

George thought about it. He thought about it a lot.

He thought about it as he ran his fingertips over the swollen flesh of his lips, dazed. Blinking at the thoughts speedrunning their way through his mind.

Here’s what no one tells you about having trust issues: above all, the person you trust the least is yourself.

Which— good thing Nick was there, under the same roof, then.

George skid out into the kitchen, where Clay has already situated himself, frying up an egg in some of Nick’s leftover bacon fat.

Sapnap himself was blearily slumped in one of their dining chairs, empty plate in front of him, working on the last dregs of his coffee.

“Sapnap,” George hissed. Clay suppressed the eyebrow he wanted to raise, politely pretending he couldn’t hear George across their tiny kitchen.

Nick lifted his head just enough to meet George’s eyes. “Blergh?”

“Could I talk to you for a minute?” George was still inexplicably whispering, head peaking out of the hallway. He was a mess, with his hair tousled messily and his lips a freshly kissed red.

He looked positively disheveled, actually. Clay hid a fond smile behind a coffee mug, because, listen. He’s made his feelings clear, he thought, but still— he can’t cave this soon.

Sapnap cast a doubtful glance between George and Clay, but ultimately shrugged. He let himself be dragged out of the room easily enough, George’s impatience evident. (And kind of endearing.)

Situating himself on the floor of George’s room, Sapnap leaned against the foot of the bed,

slumping down as George mirrored his posture with his back to the desk.

Nick waited, but George seemed content to just fidget, playing with his hands instead of talking about his feelings like a grown up. Jesus, did a man have to everything around here?

“So, wanna talk about your big gay love for Clay?” Nick started, since George obviously wasn't going to.

George groaned. “I already did.”

Sapnap raised one eyebrow, and spread his hands in a, “so why am I here, then,” kind of way.

“I mean, I think Clay and I tried to have that conversation this morning.”

Sapnap raised the other eyebrow. “You think?”

“Uh, I guess I should explain.” Sapnap rolled his eyes at that. “Shut up! Listen, I’m very confused. Wait, no. I have a question first.”

Seeing how George’s expression went from whiny to serious, Sapnap dropped the teasing act. “Yeah? Shoot.”

“Okay, so, forget all this, uh, relationship drama,” and here he giggled, losing it a little bit at the ridiculousness of this all, but recomposed himself quickly enough. “Ignoring all of the ‘relationship drama’ first. Just focus on— do you ever get confused between like, on-camera Dream and off-camera Clay?”

Sapnap stilled. Huh. So they really were going to talk about this. Alright.

“I mean, sure.” He shrugged. “Like, he’s the only one really, with an on and off camera persona, even out of all of us, right?”

“What do you mean?” Ah, there was the furrow in between George’s brows again.

“Like, you’re always George, you know? On and off camera, you’re the same cagey, squirrely George. Sure, you’re hiding shit. But you’re always hiding shit.” Sapnap didn’t really know how to explain it. He thought it was obvious, but well. These idiots seem to need everything laid out in front of them.

“IDK. We’re kind of the same. Chat’s just some acquaintance, you don’t really know them, you definitely don’t trust them, so you’re gonna be guarded, you know? Like you are when you meet a stranger for the first time. But you’re still George to them,” Nick finished.

“I guess. But you’re just Sapnap, not Nick, on camera.”

“I mean, yeah. But even off camera, with just you guys,” he paused here to shift into a higher pitched, teasing whine, “with my *‘best friends’*, it doesn’t really matter if you call me Sapnap or Nick. I just don’t like chat using Nick because it feels doxy. And because they’ve always known me as Sapnap, it’ll just be weird now.”

“Right. But when we call you Sapnap you’re not acting any different than when we call you Nick,” George guessed.

“Yeah, precisely. And we’re all actually close now, so it’s not weird anymore, like it kinda was in the early beginning.” Sapnap shrugged.

“And Dream’s different?”

“I mean, I don’t know. But Dream and Clay aren’t as exchangeable to me. Not like how ‘Sapnap’ and ‘Nick’ are to you guys, probably.” He shrugged. “It’s not even that they’re different people, really. Or that Clay’s acting. But you know what I mean— he’s Dream to us when he’s on camera, and Clay when he’s not.”

Sapnap continued, trying to make sense of these abstract ideas in his head, just for George’s sake. “Sometimes when we’re on camera, there’s moments when I don’t know how genuine he’s being, cause he can play things down. Or act the teasing up. But we all do that, really.”

“Right.” George frowned, thinking about what Clay said about this. There’s still moments of exaggeration, for the dramatics and for the ‘content’, he supposed.

“But I’m never confused when the camera’s are off, with Clay. Don’t you see it? He gets like, more relieved, I guess.”

It’s true. George had never really paid notice to it, the way Clay’s shoulders instantly went a little bit more lax after he pressed the end stream button, the tiny stress line on his forehead smoothing out.

And his smiles come easier. Maybe not as loud, and definitely not as violent, but his laughs, when the camera’s are off— they come easier. Quicker.

George brought his knees up, hugging onto them as he thought. Just because Dream was more open than on-camera George was doesn’t mean it’s all an act. And furthermore— faking bluster was not the same as faking affection.

Sapnap’s evidently given thought to this too, even if he’s never brought it up before. Maybe he thought George already knew all of this, was already up to speed with the intricacies of their online personalities. And since Sapnap's the smartest one out of all of them, really, this was all the more reassuring to George. Nick's opinions inspired a little more faith, which was no small feat when it came to George.

Nick’s voice snaps him out of his internal rambling. “—but if you’re asking what you really want to ask, George. It’s not— his love’s not a fucking act, bro, and you need to quit hurting him by saying that.”

“I didn’t mean to,” George whined.

“I know you didn’t.” Just how many more times did Nick have to roll his eyes today? Jesus. “It’s not your fault you’re not just colorblind but also love-fucking-blind, apparently. Still. Cut it out.”

George’s eyes shifted, still not fully assured.

“Listen. With you two—“ And it was Sapnap’s turn to be frustrated, because this had been going on for way too long, longer than the past couple of weeks, maybe even longer than the past year. “From the very beginning. There’s always been some sort of game that’s been fucking going on. You guys have always, I don’t know— *weaponized* anything that was personal. That the other didn’t know. Bargained for more of him, by trading away some of yours. And I don’t know what

sort of a mating dance that is—“

One where George wanted to know everything about Dream while hiding away all of himself, which, he can see now how that's kind of unfair, but alright, go off, Nick.

“It's always so— trying figure out how you could take a mile, while only giving an inch. The both of you. And George, I've known him from when I was 13. I've seen him on his first date, with girl after girl, and he's not— he's never been like that. It's only with you.”

George bit his lip, head down, not wanting to meet Sapnap's eye. “What the hell is that supposed to mean.”

“George. What I'm trying to say is— Jesus, fuck, okay. Listen. Clay loves me, right? I'll fight you for position of best friend. But he loves me like he loves everyone else, exes included, Maddie included. He loves me with his whole heart, but we've always been chill together.”

Sapnap paused, breathed, before continuing. “And I don't know if you two could be chill if you tried.”

There were chill moments, George thought, just to himself. He didn't know how to articulate the sleepy mornings of just the two of them, moments that felt like looted peace, just them sat in the kitchen, or on the couch, or tangled up in their beds.

But then he recalled how even in those moments, his arms had always tingled, itching to reach out and clutch at whatever part of Clay he could reach.

It wasn't that there weren't chill moments, he corrects himself. Just that even the chill moments were strained with a faint thread of tension, a pulsating strand of possession that burned ruby red all the time.

Sapnap was still talking, unaware of the turmoil crashing through George's being. “And— and if that's not a testament to all of that emotion and intensity going on between you two, I don't know what else it could be.”

When Nick puts it that way, it just makes George look dumb.

Well, it makes Clay look dumb too, what with all the dancing around each other they did, that they're still doing, really, so what in the hell.

Sapnap had scooted over, put his arm around George, and just let him sit, tucked into the crook of Nick's embrace. Let George rock in his arms, a ball of worry, just sitting with him in the weighted silence.

At least, until Nick had to leave for the bathroom, and then George was alone, teeth cutting into his lower lip, clutching himself as his shaken mind tried to process the conversation he just had.

Trust is not reassurance, George figured. Reassurance can be given, but trust had to be built. It's not just as simple as— as having your best friend tell you it's all a-okay.

Well, guess it's time to talk to Clay again.

He skid back out to the kitchen, peaking in from the hallway, a mirror of himself from an hour before. His hair was less ruffled, but his lips were still a fresh swollen, all nervously bitten. Clay was leaning against their countertop now, fucking around on his phone, while Nick, returned from the washroom, was again slumped over their dining table, a second cup of coffee in hand.

"Pst," George hissed, this time at Clay instead.

"Hm?" Clay answered through a mouthful of bagel, amusing himself at the splotches of red high on George's cheek.

George got redder somehow, looking away self-consciously, before bracing himself.

He raised his gaze to carefully meet Clay's own. "Could I have a moment with you, please?"

Why George thought he had to even ask was a mystery to Clay, but he was happy to play along. He hopped off the counter, brushing away some crumbs before acquiescing, following George out.

George's room was seeing a lot of intense conversation today, but that's what happened when you shoved months worth of earnestness into 24 hours.

So there they stood, six feet apart, Clay waiting on George to speak, George waiting for the words to come, until finally Clay took pity on him, reaching out to cradle his hands with his own.

"Hey," Clay started, soft. "What's going on?"

George cleared his throat. "I spoke to Nick," he tried.

"I noticed," Clay replied, his tone dry, but his face was fond.

George laughed. "Shut up," he said, and suddenly, just like that, he knew it was all going to be okay. "It was helpful, okay?"

"What, helpful like, now you believe that I'm not gonna go anywhere?"

"No," George said. "Hey."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Pretend I didn't say that."

"No," George repeated, petulant now. "That is the problem, kind of. Clay, you have to know I—I don't—I didn't trust you to 'not go anywhere', not just because I didn't trust you to be who you are—"

“Ouch.”

“I know. I know. I’m getting there. I’m sorry. I’m a dick. Yeah, I didn’t trust that the you who brushed me off that MCC was still the you who kissed me good morning. But that’s because— ‘cause more than all that, I think I didn’t—“ and here George paused, because he couldn’t do this, not while Clay was looking at him like that, gaze smoldering and intense and so, so open. Open enough to let George drive a knife through his heart and twist it, if it just meant that he’ll come back.

The words were sinking back into his stomach; ugly, selfish words that his mouth didn’t want to let through, but they had to be said. George couldn’t make this mistake anymore, couldn’t let his sentiments fester until they collapsed in onto themselves, tearing him up from the inside.

“It wasn’t just that I didn’t trust you, Clay. More than that, I— I didn’t trust *myself*. Not to be loved.” He chuckled, dry. “And I’m sorry. That’s on me.”

Clay whistled lowly. “Boy. That’s a lot.”

“Yeah,” George smiled, a little rueful. “Sorry, I’m a reserved motherfucker.”

“Stop apologizing,” Clay laughed a little, at that. “You’ve said sorry enough, this morning.”

George groaned, frustrated that Clay still wasn’t understanding. “But I wasn’t saying sorry for the right things. I’m sorrier for that, now.”

“I’m sorry for thinking that your heart—“ George paused to slip a hand over the soft cotton of Clay’s shirt, resting it against his chest, echoing his earlier motion. Gently tracing his fingers over the warp of the threads, just letting himself feel the rise and lull of Clay’s breath, acutely aware of just how human Clay was in this moment.

Underneath all that bravado, Clay was still just flesh and bone with a soul weaved through.

He breathed, a trembly thing, his eyes starting to sting. “I’m sorry for thinking that your heart ever could have been just an act.”

Clay knocked his hand away to gather George up in his own arms. Holding him up so George was forced to meet Clay's eyes through his watery tears. "So many words," he murmured, voice shaky with feeling. "Usually I'm the one with all these words."

George smiled, sheepish, but let Clay continue.

"I know you think we still need to talk, baby, but there'll be plenty of time for that." Clay wiped away a stray drop of wetness on George's face. "There'll be forever for that, if we do this right."

George's heart sung, even as a nasty, small part of it wanted to stay held down. "What do you mean—"

"I mean, you've been torturing yourself for long enough, so I'll tell you what you've been scared to hear."

Clay smiled, just once, before going on, "I'm not going anywhere."

And that was all he said before he leaned in, crossing the impossibly small distance that just minutes ago seemed to stretch for lengths of entire planetary systems.

He didn't want give George the answer he wanted, but did not need— meaningless platitudes that'll soothe his doubts, but won't calm his heart. Instead, he chose to do what they've always done best.

He met George's lips with his own.

George gasped, tiny and breathless, but that was plenty enough for Clay to take advantage of, sweeping in with a gentle press of his lips and a firm hand on his neck. Clay was kissing him like— like he was trying to press his own light into him, and George was helpless but to follow along, swelling up from the inside with Clay's own brand of sunshine. Stifling the high noises in his throat by focusing on how Clay's lips were lighting sparks up in his own.

Dirty fucking play, George thought, an amused, relieved smile playing on his lips. Clay pulled back, just to watch it spread. "I got you," he said, low.

“Yeah,” George breathed. “You do.”

*

Chapter End Notes

thank you for coming along with me on this journey. i hope you had a good time, despite it all. i'll be real, i don't think i'm going to be writing a canon-compliant verse for a while, just because of how painful this got towards the end. it really took a lot out of me, trying to separate my interpretations of their personas with their rapidly changing actual personas, when they started wildly diverging.

(it is here that i disclaim: remember this fic is merely canon-compliant (until early september), not canon, which means, i get to handwave away everything dream's ever said about deliberately playing stuff up for views and turning that on his head because get fucked this is FICTION baby)

this fic might be done, but i'm not done exploring the stories between these two. i'm currently working on an english boarding school au, which i'm excited about because its not going to be canon-compliant (duh), which means i feel less guilty being more creative with their characterization. it also gives me more playing space.

please do subscribe to my profile on ao3 if you wanna be notified when that comes out, and thank you again for reading. peace <3.

if you feel so kindly as to feed me with kudos and comments, i appreciate them beyond belief. <3 (statistics show only bla bla bla bla of you /j/jj ilyall)

follow me on twt! @jamingbenn :)

EPILOGUE: Drista Watches Her Brother Fall In Love.

Chapter Summary

Drista watches her brother fall in love.

(surprise! it's the epilogue!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Here's the thing about life— even for the ones as dramatic as Clay and George's, they still aren't fairytales. Nothing ever just goes away, really, with a simple press of the lips.

You don't just get to kiss and then instantly have a happily ever after. Love is work. Love is hard. Love is challenging each other, challenging yourself, again and again and hoping your heart doesn't tire itself out.

Love is growing up and around each other and praying to God you grow together and not apart.

George knows, now. He knows what he has to do now that he's finally stopped running away from himself. He knows there'll still be moments when he wants to bail on Clay, wants to bail out of this whole thing, scared of the work he'll have to put in, and scared most of all, that all that work might still not be enough. [Here's the thing about George. He'll torture himself, if that's what seems safe. A fear of the unknown. The devil you know is better than the devil you don't.]

But Clay is worth it. That's what he figured out. Clay is worth deviating from the plan he set out, no matter how many safety precautions the plan has. Because every time his heart pangs with that fear of failure, it pangs harder with a fear of loss.

There's still so much work to be done— Clay's since apologized for blowing up, for not talking like grown ups. They both needed to learn that, though. To not go straight to the nuclear option. Still, however.

George'll put in as much effort as love demands, as long as it means he'll never wake up without Clay's arms around him ever again.

*

"Drista watches her brother fall in love."

Hey— it's her brother, after all. She's seen him smile at her kindergarten doodles and belly laugh at her poor attempts at April Fool's pranks.

Who can blame her for that, though? The first time Clay brought back anyone to meet his family, it was Maddie, and it was a huge deal. Theirs is a close knit unit, a family bound together by an intensity that runs in their blood. They're all equally emotional creatures, quick to anger, but even quicker to love. Drista knows how important family is to Clay, how integral a part they are to the deepest parts of himself. No one could sit through a family dinner of theirs without leaving with an intimate, intimate understanding of Clay himself.

And Maddie fit in, too. (Clay never calls her that, anymore, but the word “Madison” were still foreign in Drista’s mouth, so, you’ll forgive her oversight here.) She laughed and joked and bantered right back with them all, never once shy or insecure of her place by Clay’s side. She laughed just as loud as Dad did. And whenever Clay looked at her, his eyes were always crinkled into his best smile.

Clay has always shaped Drista's understanding of the world. Shaped her understanding of love, too. And so she didn't really understand how exactly he and Maddie fell apart. Until she saw how Clay and George fell together.

She understood, then. That theirs is a different kind of love. A deeper, more delicate, and more intimate kind of love. A kind of love that scared and inspired her in the same turn.

The first time the family met George, it's over FaceTime. They weren't anything then, George still stuck in England, and Dream just starting to blow up on YouTube. Those were the simpler days, the 'before' days, before the fame started to weigh so heavily on Clay it seemed almost physical at times. The days when a mention of his career still brought only a light to his eyes, without the sag of his shoulders that comes now.

Clay had introduced him as George, my friend. And George had blushed, smiled, and called Mom, "Ma'am".

While Mom was busy blushing over that, Drista barely got a good look in at George, too distracted by the unfamiliar look in her brother's eyes. It was that same crinkly smile, his best, most precious one, but there was a warmth that Drista had never seen before.

Now she knows that glow to be one of pride.

Of course her brother's competitive. Her whole damn family is competitive.

She's used to that by now, the animated, intense way her brother gets when he's doing anything really, but especially when he's playing a video game. Doesn't really matter what it is, from Monopoly to Call of Duty to Minecraft, of course. Drista's used to tuning out the angry screams of her brother from when he was a mere teen to today's young adult.

It's like a basic fact of life— water is wet, the sky is blue, Clay will not be happy when he loses to you.

So it surprises her, of course it does, when she's sprawled in his bed while he's on a call with George, playing out another one of their stupid bets on Minecraft. George's calling foul because she's shouting out 'tips' over from across the room, but really she's trying to trip Clay up as much as she's trying to help, because it's always kinda funny to watch him get mad.

(That time he punched a wall in their connecting wall was like, the funniest shit ever. Also gave her an excuse to throw paper balls at his face even from one room over.)

“Okay, okay, truce,” George was saying, laugh distorted a little over the speakerphone.

“Fuck you, no truce, first one to find diamond wins it all,” Clay shot back, no hesitation whatsoever.

Drista snorted, sitting up a bit to watch this play out. “Deal,” George called, and off they were.

It was a little unfair, mostly because Clay was already in a cave, hitting Y=11 easily, but she knew that George was still on the ground in a desert biome from an earlier bet. So she wasn't really that surprised when Clay found a flash of blue in pretty much no time at all, just from digging forward.

What she was surprised at was the shifty look he shot her, turning behind to face her so she could see the finger he put up to his lips. “Quiet,” he mouthed.

“What?!” She mouthed back.

“Let him win,” Clay whispered, and Drista let her mouth fall open in shock. Let him win? Who are you, and what have you done to my brother?

She thinks she understands a little better, when Clay smiles at George's elated whoop a couple of minutes later. She's glad George can't see Clay's stupid, tiny smile as George crows about his victory, because Clay's doing a decent job at acting all bummed out.

Maybe it makes Clay happier to see George win than to win himself. It'll be a first for her over-competitive brother, but as Drista is quickly learning, George seems to bring out a lot of firsts in her brother himself.

When George finally flew down to Florida, the whole family offered to help George move his things into Clay's downtown apartment. Oh, out of a pure desire to be helpful, for sure, but also because her family is, if nothing else, a bunch of nosy jokesters eager to square George up.

Clay, smartly, kept them all away, until George had gotten over his jetlag and his nerves and graciously let Mom invite them all for family dinner.

"He's even twinkier in real life," Drista had hissed, under her breath, at Clay's slouched figure. And then yelped when Clay dug his fingers meanly into her side, shushing her loudly.

"Moooooom," she'd whined. "Clay's being mean to me even in front of the guest!"

"Be nice," her mom had soothed, trying to dump more potatoes onto George's plate. "You're so skinny, my dear, we gotta get some food into you!"

"Exactly," Drista whispered to Clay at that, "See, even Mom thinks he's a twink."

She sort-of-maybe-totally deserved the twist to her ear at that dig. Not that she's not used to that by now. In this family, sometimes punches can mean affection, too. Most times, if she's being honest.

Not a great way to woo a man, Clay, but you got there in the end.

"Got you a gift," Clay had said, not looking at Drista as he threw her a tiny, poorly wrapped box.

“Aw, it’s not even my birthday!” Drista was trying to be less gleeful about all the free shit she was getting now that her brother was like, rich rich, but listen, this is America, and as much as Mr. Woodhouse in AP Sociology shits on capitalism, AirPods are still like, pretty goddamn dope.

Still, she stilled after tearing open the gift. “Clay,” she said.

“I figured, next time you get into a fight with Mom, you could just come over to wait out the storm,” he said, still not looking at her.

“These are your car and house keys,” she said again, unmoving, disbelieving.

“As I said,” Clay kept his gaze stubbornly trailed on an indiscernible object right about Drista’s head, “my house is your home too.”

Their family is one of heavy affection, but more-so in joking kicks to the shin than in heartfelt expressions of love. So when she threw her hands around her brothers waist, clutching at the soft fabric of the hoodie, Clay let out a surprised oof, but sunk into it with a familiarity that betrayed his unaffected demeanor. “Love you too, kid.”

The first time Drista lets herself into Clay’s apartment, there wasn’t even a fight going on with Mom. Both her parents were just be working late, and she really didn’t wanna head back to an empty and dark house. It was one of those gloomy, rainy days that sometimes happened in Florida, and whatever, she just didn’t really wanna be alone, okay.

Also, she maybe wanted to take advantage of Clay’s super-fancy super-fast gaming rig. Valorant was a thing that had just happened to her, and she was sad to announce that she may now have an addiction.

The click of her keys was soft, Clay’s locks new enough that there was minimal jiggling of the doorknob before it pushed open easily. Drista opened her mouth to announce her arrival with a shout, but was struck still in the doorway by the sight in front of her.

She could barely see into the kitchen from where she’s standing in the landing, but through a silver

of the entryway she could still see where the two boys were making lunch. Clay sidestepped neatly around George, a practiced motion of familiarity, putting his hand on the side of George's waist to neatly move him around. The movement caught her eye, but not her breath.

What truly made her stop and think, "Oh," is when George leaned into the touch, a minuscule shifting of his weight that was as loud as a shout.

Oh, she thought, watching Clay look down at George with an unfamiliar fondness in his eye.

Drista thought she knew all of Clay's expressions, but well, apparently she still can be surprised.

And then Clay catches her looking, and he maybe goes red a little bit, but smiles at her nonetheless, and there, that's the familiar smile she's used to looking at. She feels her face smile back, and the air shifts from electric back to just regular ole Florida warm, and she lets herself sink back into the comfort of regularity again.

She started going over to Clay's more frequently after that, sometimes-maybe-a-lot, mostly because it was just more fun to talk shit with Clay and George than it was to stay at home alone while her parents were at work.

Her brother and George talk like their parents do, sometimes, soft, serious tones discussing the merits of skim versus 2% fat in milk before seamlessly shifting into teasing banter about nothing and everything at all. It's what she misses the most when her parents are gone, the familiar sounds of cheerful domesticity, something she's been lucky enough to be surrounded by her whole life.

(This was still before, by the way. Before they got their shit together, they were already like this. So don't ask how she knew it was inevitable.)

But they fold her into their conversations, never once making her feel too small or too out of place, even when they're teasing her about being a 'child'. They make her playfully play judge for their pointless debates, they nudge her until she starts talking about that boy in Chemistry with floppy hair and hazel eyes, and George, sometimes, when Clay's pretending he isn't looking, teaches her how to MLG water bucket in Minecraft with careful hands and steady eyes.

So she likes being over at Clay's place. (Clay and George's, now, she supposes.) It strikes her, one day, sitting at the dining table as she scrolls through her Instagram, that she feels just as chill here as she does back in her bedroom at home. It shocks her, a little, how comfortable she feels around George, like he's really been incorporated into their dynamic in a way Maddie never did.

It feels like a betrayal to Maddie somehow, because sometimes on holidays they still send each other "Merry Christmas!" snaps, but maybe this is all a part of growing up.

And she cannot begrudge the happy warmth inside of her when she comes barging in after school and George wordlessly starts preparing another portion of the dinner he's making. When she catches Clay looking at the two of them in the kitchen, dancing to Taylor Swift as they grate carrots, looking dumbfounded with his hands in his pockets and his eyes bright.

At the small smile hanging on the corner of his lips that she's not even sure he knows is there.

It happens slowly. So slowly you wouldn't have caught it if you weren't looking for it at all.

It also doesn't, not really— maybe it only happened slowly because it was always there. She's sleep-deprived one afternoon, having slept late the night before from a movie marathon session gone wrong, and falls asleep right on Clay's (snuggly, comfy, way-to-expensive, absolutely heavenly soft) couch. She barely registers the soft pressure of a blanket being thrown over her, but when she wakes up, she has her legs in Clay's lap as he, also, is slumped over and snoring away.

She takes one moment to thank YouTube for her brother's stupidly big couch, before she registers George leaning against the wall through the slit of her squinting eyes.

He's in Clay's sweater, which isn't unusual, the two close enough in size that they essentially share one big wardrobe now, but it's the soft way he's rubbing the fabric in his hands that catches her eye. He doesn't even notice how she's awake, in part thanks to her stellar acting skills, but mostly because his gaze is so steadily trailed onto Clay's peaceful, dozing face.

Drista doesn't even think George realizes just how he looks, his face twisted into a sad expression of yearning and his hands clenching around something that's not there.

She sits up, not wanting to bear a second of this any longer, and reaches out to put her hands on Clay's skin for the other person in the room who can't. George startles, but she couldn't care less.

"Hey, sleepyhead," she calls, nudging Clay's arm. "Wake up before you pull a muscle sleeping like that."

Across the room, George exhales, long and slow. Drista lowers her gaze and pretends she can't hear it at all.

"Hey," she asks one day. "You would tell me if you liked someone, right?"

A pause.

Drista looks up to where Clay has froze over his PC. "... Right?" She repeats.

"... Adult relationships are complicated," Clay says slowly.

She wrinkles her nose. "Doesn't look that complicated to me."

Clay slowly walks around where she's spinning on his fancy chair and shuts the door softly. "What the hell are you talking about?!" He whispers.

"Nothing," she says, too quick. "Just. Asking."

He exhales. "You know I adore you."

"Yes."

“Despite you being an asshole who mooches off of my food and my Netflix subscription.”

“Yes.”

“So don’t take it personally when I say no, I really won’t.”

“So you don’t like George.”

“Shh! Oh my god, he’s literally in the next room,” Clay hisses.

Drista rolls her eyes, like. “As if this room isn’t soundproofed to hell.” She gestures broadly at all of the sound absorption foam tacked onto the walls for optimal streaming.

“... Point.”

He sits down onto his bed, and Drista tries not to pout. “But I told you about Ben in Chemistry,” she says, petulant.

“Right, and you should totally say yes when he asks you out to prom.”

“So why won’t you tell me about what’s going on with George? I have eyes, you know. You look at him even more than you looked at Maddie.”

“Madison,” Clay corrects, even as he knows it’s a losing battle. “George and I are friends. And business partners,” he tacks on. “Maddie and I were strangers.”

“So?”

“So it’s complicated,” Clay tries, his eyes closing. “Like I said.”

“Okay,” Drista says, not liking the pain creeping into her brother’s expression. “Hey, could you

help me fix this clicking thing that's been happening on my keyboard?"

She's willing to let this topic go, if just for the visible relief on Clay's face. She'll drop it for now.

More than Drista loves spending her afternoons over at Clay's place, she loves it when Clay and George come back *home* home for dinner sometimes. I mean, first of all, Mom goes, like, all the way out, and cooks up a feast like no other.

Second of all, she gets to watch the Clay and George show undisturbed while they're distracted by Mom and Dad.

It's shocking, how similar the two pairs can be sometimes, well practiced in their familiarity with each other. George passes the gravy over to Clay like Dad hands over dessert to Mom. Clay sneaks in hot sauce on George's plate so he, the weak British ass he is, coughs and chokes and begs for milk just like how Mom swapped out the salt for sugar in Dad's coffee just for a laugh.

She sits, and she watches, and she wonders if Clay or George know just how much they echo each other. She watches Clay's hand trail over George's unnecessarily when he hands him the dishes to dry. She sees how Clay wordlessly takes the wine glasses from George's grasp, reaching up to tuck them away in the highest shelf out of George's reach, just so George wouldn't have to embarrass himself. (Wordlessly, but not expressionlessly. She also catches the cheeky grin Clay throws George's way, but it's missing even playful malice.)

It's fascinating, and it's new, is what it is, because she's never seen her brother like that. But he obviously doesn't want it pushed, so she files it all carefully away in her head, watching, seeing, but she doesn't bring it up, not again.

And then she has her first big fight with Mom.

Mom's pretty good with letting her be a 16 year old, usually, but then sometimes she'll remember

how her son didn't go to college and sure, he's successful now, but there's still a definite sense of uncertainty that lingers around his fledging internet career that Mom gets really affected by. And then Drista suffers, because Mom starts harking about her grades and subtly sliding her college brochures and makes noises about med school.

Which, Drista really tries. She tries, and for the most part she's a pretty good student, but she really, really doesn't want to go to med school. George's been teaching her a little coding, mostly because she wanted to redirect her school homepage to [this](#), and also just because it's fun and she thinks she could be really good at it.

It freaks Mom out, though, because she thinks Drista's also gonna go into an Internet Creator career if she goes down the coding route, which, she really isn't that interested, she's been on her brother's Twitter account and it just seems like a lot. And software engineers get paid like, a decent amount, and she'll have a normal job with normal hours like a normal person. She'll let Clay bankroll all her luxuries as she lives a peaceful, anonymous life.

But Mom still thinks she's gonna go all Fundy and rogue and follow in her brother's footsteps. And so, the constant med school talk.

"I won't have time to take CS 1 if I take AP Biology, Mom," she's saying, trying not to get too frustrated at the thousandth time they've been having this conversation.

"Yes, but Biology keeps your options open, and you can still take CS 1 in college if you really want to do that in a couple of years. You can only take AP Bio now."

"But I don't want to, Mom. I'm not gonna be good at it and it's gonna pull my GPA down and then I'll be really screwed!"

"Well, you'e just gonna have to learn to be good at it," Mom says, pacifying, her overly sweet tone grating on Drista's nerves.

"Why can't I ever do anything I want! You let Clay do anything the fuck he wants!" Drista shouts back, swearing, sick of how many times she's tried to have this conversation, and sick of her mom not actually listening to what she says. And then she bursts into tears, shocking everyone including herself, bolting up from the dinner table to grab her backpack and sprint out of the front door.

When she gets to Clay's place, he's already standing in the doorway.

"Mom said you ran from dinner," he starts.

"Mom wants me in pre-med," she explains, blinking back frustrated tears.

Clay sighs. "Alright, then. you've made quite the statement on where you stand about that."

Drista stomps the dirt off her boots in his entryway. "Well, she always needed a dramatic moment to get something through her head."

"She'll come around," he says, pulling her into a tight hug. "She just wants you to be happy."

Drista snuffles, feeling a lot like 16 in her brother's arms. "Sorry if this is a bad time."

"Nah," Clay laughs. "I'll always have time for you, idiot."

Drista closes her eyes, letting herself sink into her brother's familiar arms, her brother who has always tried to support her in whatever she wanted, her brother who has always been happy with whoever she determined to be herself. And then froze as she inhaled and her tears cleared and her vision stopped being blurry.

"You smell like George," she starts.

"Well, this is his shirt. Ran out of laundry," Clay coughs.

"That is a hickey," she accuses, straightening up so quick her head knocks into Clay's chin. She pokes it, and Clay hisses, catching her hand with his own.

"You don't know what a hickey is, you're 16 and a child," he says, strained.

“Yesterday Clara from my grade got suspended because she fucked Daniel in the janitors closet and you could hear them all the way from my locker,” Drista responds, tone bone-dry. “I’m sixteen and everyone around me is terrible but that does mean I absolutely know what a hickey is.”

“Okay, but we’re focusing on your crisis now, not my own, I’m your big brother, I can deal with that on my own time,” Clay manages to hurry out. “And please never talk to me about anything like that ever again. I cannot live through high school a second time, even if just through your anecdotes. What a horrible, hormone driven, terrible time.”

“I don’t wanna talk about my crisis right now,” Drista says, voice small. “Please just distract me with your mess of a love life and let me ruthlessly tease you to ease my own suffering.”

“Wow, forward today, aren’t we,” Clay smiles, letting his sister drag him into his own room so she could pet his cat. “And I mean, I don’t know. George and I are figuring things out. Just like you are, I guess.”

“You like him?”

The way Clay instantly turned red was a pretty good sign, that yes, he did. “Of course I like him,” he scoffs, however, in that tone of his that’s trying to sound dismissive and convincing at the same time. “He’s my best friend. He’s— he’s *George*,” he says, a little helpless.

“Alright,” she says, watching the little flex in his forearm, like he’s physically holding himself back. “Let me know when I’ll have to get a gown for the wedding.”

And then Clay hits her in the face with a pillow, and she shrieks, and then they’re play fighting, and really, it’s like nothing wrong has ever happened at all.

“If I had known you were gonna stay over so much, I would have gotten a bigger apartment with more guest rooms,” Clay grumbled later that night, carrying extra linens over to the couch. Drista hadn’t wanted to go back home yet, still pissed at her mom for not letting her make her own decisions, and Clay’s couch was, bear repeating, an absolute work of art. “Or you could just stay in the merch room, you know.”

“First of all, never suggest that ever again, your merch room is terrifying and I refuse to sleep with a gazillion white blob faces staring down at me. Secondly, your couch is probably more comfortable than my bed, bro,” she deadpanned, absolutely not bothered. “And I’ll get to drive your swanky new Tesla to school.”

“If you crash it...” Clay trailed off with a threatening gesturing, laughing when Drista just rolled her eyes. He threw the duvet onto her, and then threw himself onto the couch, smushing her into the cushions.

“Seriously though. You know I have your back, right? I’ll try to talk to Mom. And even if nothing works, you can still have George teach you Python.”

“I know,” she said, voice small. “Thanks. I don’t say it enough.”

“Love you, dipshit.”

“Love you too, asshole.”

Drista wakes up in the dead of the night, disorientated for a second as she remembered when she was. Nature calls. Groaning, she hustled over to the bathroom, blinking at the clock on the wall. 2:43am.

She pads carefully over the hardwood floors of her brother’s apartment, trying not to wake anyone else. She shouldn’t have worried, though, because as she ghosts by George’s room, she hears two familiar sets of voices through the cracked door. She should have known those two night owls wouldn’t be asleep just yet, but well.

“I’m just also worried about Mom.” Clay’s voice drifts out.

A rustle of fabric. “Mm?”

“I think she’s more worried about my job than she lets on. Don’t think she thinks it’s sustainable.”

“I mean, it’s not, really.” George’s voice was soft, but serious in a way it rarely is. “But you’re being smart with your investments and dividends, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So stop worrying. You’re gonna give yourself lines, and then I won’t fancy you anymore.”

Fancy. Seriously? People really talk like this? British people have to be kidding, Drista thought.

“Fancy. Seriously? You British people really talk like this?” Clay goads. Thank you, brother, for always having my back.

“Shut up. I’m just saying, everything’s gonna be fine. Your sister’s gonna do great in school, you’re gonna have a great and lengthy career, and I’m gonna support you both in whatever you do.”

More rustling. Clay murmurs something indiscernible, that has George letting out a little giggle.

George continues. “I know. It’ll be fine, if mundane. But I’m sure something new will occupy you, and we’ll find a way to fit ourselves around it. It’ll be fine, and I know I always say that, but it really will be, as long as you’re by my side.”

Sappy, Drista thought, her nose wrinkling. She takes a tentative step forward, peering carefully through the crack in the door.

She finds her brother, her big, brave, brother who went out and took the risk of his life, who gives so much of his precious time and energy back into protecting her, nurturing her, no matter how big he’s gotten and how thin he’s stretched out—her strong, strong brother, curled up small in George’s arms, his eyes downcast and gaze heavy. Drista’s heart hurt with all young he looks, how open and vulnerable, none of his defenses up or engaged. Clay was mouthing his words into the curve of George’s neck, the touch not remotely sexual but just intimate, just because he wanted that physical connection, that point of comfort.

She finds her brother, her big, brave, brother, in the arms of his own big, brave, person. She watches as George holds him tight, and murmurs soft, reassuring words, the words only he knows how to say, the words Drista wouldn't even know where to begin to find, into her brother's ear. Some were about love and feelings, big, abstract things Drista doesn't think anyone actually understands, but mostly they were just about tax codes and content algorithms and retirement plans. They seemed like the right words anyways, no matter how mundane and boring the latter ones seemed to her.

She watches her brother, her big, brave, brother, who does all of the comforting for her whenever she seeks it, be comforted by his person instead. She stands there, watching, learning, feeling; and thinks, maybe love isn't just in the loud honking laughs and the roaring contagious joy, not like she thought it was.

Maybe it's also in late night conversations, gentle smiles, and the rough timbre of one's raw voice. Maybe that's where the trust in one another hides, in the gentle steadiness that one needs to build a life together. In the tender trust shared in even more tender moments as two people fight their fear to try and build a future together.

It's in the soft quiet of plans being made, plans that one knows, *knows* are ever-changing even as they are being made. It's in the steadying of oneself against the uncertainty of life, ready to face head on, together, all of the problems in all of their plans, just as they arrive.

- end. -

Chapter End Notes

thank you for your kindness and your time.

i just made a discord, so please, join me here: <https://discord.gg/3Cu6yhPvT>

End Notes

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replenishes the lifeblood this fic sapped away from me otl

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